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**The University as a Battleground:
Politics, Identity, and Knowledge
in the United States**



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1. *From Trump I to Trump II*

During Donald Trump's first presidential term (2017-2021), federal intervention in higher education was, on the whole, relatively limited and sporadic. The administration issued guidelines aimed at restricting race-based affirmative action and diversity policies, emphasized the so-called protection of free speech on campuses, and repeatedly proposed funding cuts to agencies such as the National Endowment for the Humanities. However, these measures did not substantially alter the architecture of federal research funding or the internal governance structures of universities¹. At the same time, broader social transformations were reshaping universities in significant ways. In particular, the rise of the *#MeToo* movement at the beginning of Trump's presidency, followed by the widespread mobilization of the *Black Lives Matter* movement after the killing of George Floyd in May 2020, during the Covid-19 pandemic, prompted many universities to adopt policies grouped under the general label of 'Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion'. These initiatives had a substantial impact on recruitment practices and contributed to a broader shift in the intellectual climate of higher education. I will return to this issue later. For the moment, still with reference to political developments not directly connected to the administration's higher education policies, but whose effects have been and continue to be significant, it is necessary to note the marked rightward shift of the U.S. Supreme Court following Donald Trump's appointment of three justices: Neil Gorsuch (2017), Brett Kavanaugh (2018), and Amy Coney Barrett (2020), all figures with a strong and explicit political profile. In the sphere of higher education, the consequences of this transformation became fully apparent in June 2023, during the Biden presidency, when the Court ruled in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* and *Students for Fair Admissions v. University of North Carolina* that race-based admissions practices violated both the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment and Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Title VI, the sixth section of the original Act, prohibited discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin in any program or activity receiving federal funding, a provision adopted less than a decade after the formal dismantling of segregationist policies².

From a cultural perspective, the battle against Critical Race Theory and so-called Gender Theory became one of the defining features of right-wing political discourse, increasingly drawing public attention to the higher education system. A real turning point came with the widely publicized congressional hearings of the presidents of Harvard University (Claudine Gay), the University of Pennsylvania (Liz Magill), and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Sally Kornbluth). These hearings focused on what was described as antisemitism on

¹ Executive Order on campus free speech (2019), <<https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-improving-free-inquiry-transparency-accountability-colleges-universities/>>. All links were verified on 19 December 2025.

² *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*, No. 20-1199 (U.S. Supreme Court, June 29, 2023), <https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/22pdf/20-1199_hgdj.pdf>.

campuses in the wake of the demonstrations and campus occupations that followed the Israeli massacres in Gaza after October 7, 2023. All three presidents had been appointed by their respective boards of trustees after 2021, in part as an expression of a clear political desire to demonstrate a visible commitment to breaking what was described as the glass ceiling of discrimination against women in university leadership. Whatever one's opinion of this strategy, their testimony revealed a striking inability to respond effectively to the questions posed by members of Congress. If I may add a personal observation, I vividly recall the discomfort and genuine *Fremdscham* I felt while watching the leaders of some of the world's most prestigious universities, unable to depart from the defensive script they had evidently coordinated with legal counsel and seemingly incapable of offering clear and substantive answers to what were often aggressive and manipulative questions³.

After this image catastrophe, the presidents' curricula vitae became the target of a broad delegitimization campaign amplified by social media. In early 2024, detailed allegations of plagiarism against Claudine Gay, combined with growing scrutiny of the weakness of the academic credentials on which she had built her career, led to her resignation in January 2024. That resignation carried considerable symbolic weight, not least because her appointment as the first African American woman to lead one of the world's most prominent cultural institutions had itself been widely celebrated for its symbolic significance⁴. At the same time, student protest movements in support of Palestine, involving encampments, demonstrations, and building occupations, continued throughout the spring of 2024, eliciting markedly different responses from university administrations. In several cases, local or state authorities were called in to dismantle the encampments, resulting in the arrest of students and, in some instances, faculty or staff members. In April 2024, the president of Columbia University, Nemat Shafik, authorized the intervention of the New York Police Department on campus. Once again, her inability to manage an emergency situation appears to have played a significant role in her decision to resign from office a few months later, in August 2024⁵.

³ House Committee on Education and the Workforce, Holding Campus Leaders Accountable and confronting Antisemitism, *Congress.gov hearing transcript portion*, Dec. 5, 2023, <<https://www.congress.gov/event/118th-congress/house-event/LC72923/text>>.

⁴ Rahem D. Hamid, Nia L. Orakwue, Elias J. Schisgall, Despite Support from Corporation, Harvard President Gay Under Fire Over Plagiarism Allegations, *The Harvard Crimson*, December 12, 2023, <<https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2023/12/12/allegations-plagiarism-gay-dissertation/>>; Josh Moody, Who Failed Whom at Harvard?, *Inside Higher Ed*, January 8, 2024, <<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/governance/executive-leadership/2024/01/08/did-gay-fail-harvard-or-did-harvard-fail-gay>>.

⁵ A Message from President Minouche Shafik, <<https://president.columbia.edu/news/message-president-minouche-shafik-5-1-24>> (official statement authorizing NYPD intervention on campus, 1 May 2024); Columbia University, Minouche Shafik Steps Down as President of Columbia University, <<https://news.columbia.edu/news/minouche-shafik-steps-down-president-columbia-university>> (official resignation statement, effective 14 August 2024).

These events contributed to the transformation of the university system into a highly charged political battleground and may help explain the decisive shift that began with Trump's second presidency in January 2025. Unlike his first term, higher education and research policy became, from the outset, central targets of executive intervention. The most consequential measures concerned federal research funding. On May 23, 2025, Trump issued the executive order *Restoring Gold Standard Science*, which directed federal agencies to review the standards governing publicly funded research and expanded the authority of politically appointed officials in scientific evaluation. This was followed on August 7, 2025, by the executive order *Improving Oversight of Federal Grantmaking*, which subjected discretionary federal grants to direct political review, effectively imposing severe limits on so-called overhead⁶. In the U.S. system, overhead refers to the portion of research funding that does not go directly to the project or the individual researcher, but instead flows to the host university to cover the general costs that make research possible, including libraries, archives, IT infrastructure, buildings, and administrative support. Unlike many European systems, where such costs are often covered structurally by the state, in the American system they are calculated as an additional percentage of each grant and negotiated between universities and federal agencies. In practice, overhead functions as the mechanism through which externally funded research subsidizes the overall operation of the university, rather than merely supporting individual projects. Until 2024, these negotiated rates at most large research universities typically ranged between 50 and 60 percent of direct costs, amounting to just under a third of total project funding. By contrast, the Trump administration's new guidelines aim to impose a uniform cap of around 15 percent. It is difficult to overstate the impact of this decision, which would drastically reduce universities' ability to cover their structural costs⁷.

In parallel with these funding reforms, the administration imposed a comprehensive reorientation of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies. The three terms, of course, have circulated in political and legal debate in the United States since the civil rights era, but the triadic formulation 'diversity, equity, and inclusion' is relatively recent. I am not aware of any reliable studies that trace its precise origins, but the expression appears to have been used systematically in the guidelines of nonprofit organizations and in university administrative documents from the early 2000s onward. The acronym 'DEI' came into more widespread use after the mid-2010s, including during Trump's first presidency, and achieved near-universal institutional diffusion after 2020, following the protests sparked by the killing of George Floyd. At that point, DEI became

⁶ The White House, Executive Orders: Restoring Gold Standard Science (May 23, 2025), <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/05/restoring-gold-standard-science/>>; *Improving Oversight of Federal Grantmaking* (August 7, 2025), <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/08/improving-oversight-of-federal-grantmaking/>>.

⁷ National Education Association, State Funding Update: The Fiscal and Political Crossroads Facing Public Higher Education (September 12, 2025), <<https://www.nea.org/resource-library/higher-ed-state-funding-report>>.

a standard administrative label across higher education, corporate governance, and public institutions.

It was this established and bureaucratized framework that federal policy during Trump's second presidency explicitly targeted. Drawing on the Supreme Court's 2023 decision discussed above, federal guidelines required universities to eliminate race as a factor in admissions and to dismantle DEI initiatives, with funding terminated or frozen whenever it was deemed to be connected to those objectives⁸.

A further area of intervention concerned freedom of expression within universities. Prior to Donald Trump's election, large segments of the American right had portrayed themselves as defenders of free speech against what they described as the 'liberal' or 'woke' intolerance of the academic world. In the weeks immediately following the election, however, and particularly through an increasing tendency to conflate criticism of the State of Israel with antisemitism, a significant shift occurred. The American political right, often with the consent or active cooperation of substantial portions of the Democratic leadership, promoted strategies of pressure and deterrence directed at students, faculty, and activists who expressed critical positions on Israel and on United States policy in the Middle East. The effect was a narrowing of the practical boundaries of freedom of expression on campus.

A case in point is that of Mahmoud Khalil, a master's student at Columbia University and a prominent figure in the pro-Palestinian student movement, who was arrested by ICE agents on March 8, 2025, despite holding a green card, and was released only after more than one hundred days in detention⁹. In March 2025, the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights notified sixty universities of the initiation or possible opening of Title VI investigations into alleged failures to address incidents of antisemitism, with the prospect of sanctions on federal funding¹⁰. Universities' responses varied. The Ivy League, despite comprising private institutions with vast endowments, generally adopted risk-management strategies, often entering into negotiations with federal agencies to restore suspended or threatened funding. These negotiations frequently resulted in revisions to campus policies governing protests. Outside the Ivy League, responses were more diverse. Some public and private institutions

⁸ J. Brian Charles, The Evolution of DEI, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 23, 2023, <<https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-evolution-of-dei>>; Erin Gretzinger, Maggie Hicks, Christa Dutton, Jasper Smith, Tracking Higher Ed's Dismantling of DEI, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, December 8, 2025, <<https://www.chronicle.com/article/tracking-higher-eds-dismantling-of-dei>>.

⁹ Mahmoud Khalil, What Does My Detention by ICE Say About America?, *The Washington Post*, April 17, 2025, <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2025/04/17/mahmoud-khalil-columbia-student-ice-detention>>.

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights Sends Letters to 60 Universities Under Investigation for Antisemitic Discrimination and Harassment, March 10, 2025, <<https://www.ed.gov/about/news/press-release/us-department-of-educations-office-civil-rights-sends-letters-60-universities-under-investigation-antisemitic-discrimination-and-harassment>> (official OCR press release).

moved quickly to align themselves with federal guidelines, while others offered varying degrees of resistance. This context also includes the case of the University of California, Berkeley, which in September 2025 informed approximately 160 students, faculty, and staff members that their names had been forwarded to the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights as part of a federal investigation into alleged incidents of antisemitism¹¹.

Another highly significant element should be added to this picture. Beginning in 2024–2025, the Trump administration sought to use immigration law in an openly political manner to exert pressure on universities, focusing in particular on foreign students and scholars holding F-1 and J-1 visas. In several cases, the government revoked or threatened to revoke certifications and visas not on the basis of individual conduct, but as a means of institutional pressure and retaliation, portraying international students as potential 'agitators', ideologically suspect figures, or even as risks to national security¹².

These targeted interventions in universities form part of a broader trajectory in federal education policy aimed at downsizing, if not eliminating, the role of the Department of Education, a federal agency established only in 1979, by transferring its powers to other federal institutions or to individual states¹³. It is no coincidence that, in what was widely perceived as a provocative appointment, Linda McMahon, former chief executive officer of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), was named to head the department. Her prior direct involvement in the field of education was limited to a brief tenure as a member of the Connecticut Board of Education (2009–2010), to which she was appointed by Republican Governor Jodi Rell¹⁴.

2. *The Manhattan Institute*

The administration's sharp change of pace in university policy, compared to Trump's first term, is so pronounced that it invites reflection on the actors associated with this political shift. After Biden's victory, and on the basis of a narrative centered on Trump's alleged subversive strategy, his supporters and

¹¹ Berkeley Releases 160 Names, Complies With U.S. Investigation, Inside Higher Ed, September 16, 2025, <<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/quick-takes/2025/09/16/berkeley-releases-160-names-complies-us-investigation>>.

¹² American Historical Association, AHA Files Amicus Brief in Support of Foreign Scholars, *AHA News & Announcements*, December 22, 2025, <<https://www.historians.org/news/aha-files-amicus-brief-in-support-of-foreign-scholars/>>.

¹³ U.S. Department of Education, An Overview of the U.S. Department of Education, <<https://www.ed.gov/about/ed-overview/an-overview-of-the-us-department-of-education--pg-1>>.

¹⁴ Eric Kelderman, After Cutting Half Its Staff, Trump Signs an Order Directing the Education Dept. to Close, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 20, 2025, <<https://www.chronicle.com/article/after-cutting-half-its-staff-trump-signs-an-order-directing-the-education-department-to-close>>; Education Week Library Staff, Linda McMahon, U.S. Secretary of Education: Background and Achievements, *Education Week*, March 4, 2025, <<https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/linda-mcmahon-u-s-secretary-of-education-background-and-achievements/2025/03>>.

much of the political right were largely excluded from the mainstream public sphere. They responded by organizing parallel networks of organizations, advocacy groups, radio programs, and websites that were largely invisible to the country's cultural intelligentsia. This media ecology changed rapidly following Elon Musk's 2022 acquisition of Twitter and its rebranding as X, which transformed the platform into a central arena for the amplification of right-wing political discourse, weakened previously established norms of content moderation, and simultaneously accelerated the migration of journalists, academics, and cultural institutions toward alternative platforms such as Bluesky¹⁵. Adopting a consciously Gramscian strategy, defeated in what might be called a war of movement, they regrouped in a war of position. Among the institutions that played a leading role in this process is the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, a conservative think tank based in New York, founded in 1977, which over time has increasingly aligned itself with the more radical positions of the contemporary American right¹⁶. In an effort to shape right-wing approaches to higher education policy, this think tank has concentrated its efforts on opposing affirmative action, DEI programs, and what it characterizes as liberal or 'woke' positions, which had exerted a significant influence on university policies in previous years. A central figure in this strategy is Christopher F. Rufo, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute. According to his own account, after a left-wing youth and studies at Georgetown University, his career as a documentary filmmaker took him both to the developing world and to some of the poorest regions of the United States. These experiences, he claims, gradually persuaded him of the impracticability of the wealth-redistribution strategies advocated by socialist movements and led him toward increasingly moderate and then explicitly right-wing positions. Long before DEI became a central objective of conservative politics, Rufo had already directed and organized campaigns against diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives within universities. His critique rested on the claim that policies taking race into account in admissions and faculty hiring constituted illegitimate discrimination against white and Asian candidates, and that universities implementing such practices were systematically violating the Civil Rights Act of 1964. His prominent role in this broader cultural struggle for hegemony became widely visible during the campaign that culminated in the resignation of Claudine Gay as president of Harvard University, and was followed by similar pressure campaigns targeting oth-

¹⁵ On the consolidation and political normalization of parallel right-wing media ecosystems in the years following 2020, including talk radio, digital outlets, and alternative social platforms, see for example Helen Coster, John Shiffman, Christine Soares, Alexandra Ulmer and Linda So, In Trump 2.0, MAGA-aligned Influencers and Media Emerge as the New Mainstream, *Reuters Special Report*, November 8, 2025, <<https://www.reuters.com/investigations/trump-20-maga-aligned-influencers-media-emerge-new-mainstream-2025-11-08/>>.

¹⁶ Although in political debate the right tends to be defined as conservative, I believe it is inappropriate to use this term since, as also in many European countries, it is the centrist or center-left parties that are conservative, a term that is ill-suited to a right wing that often takes bold political positions.

er university leaders, often centered on allegations of plagiarism¹⁷. Far from a marginal figure, Rufo also played a decisive role in the restructuring of New College of Florida, where, as a member of the board of trustees, he oversaw a radical reconfiguration of the institution's leadership¹⁸. The censorial and controlling tendencies that have emerged on the right, particularly on social media, have led some observers to describe this phenomenon as a mirror image of the liberal intolerance it originally claimed to oppose. This has gone so far that some commentators, admittedly with a certain irony, now speak of a 'Woke Right' to describe those sectors of the right that adopt the language, categories, and strategies typically associated with the 'woke' movement, but redirect them toward identities understood as traditional, such as white, Christian, or Jewish, or toward a conventional idea of America. In practice, the Woke Right relies on tools strikingly similar to those it once denounced, including obsessive policing of language and forms of cancel culture used to sanction opinions deemed unacceptable¹⁹. Obviously, the murder of Charlie Kirk on September 25, 2025, further exacerbated the already tense intellectual climate in the country, as is often the case when the weapons of criticism give way to the criticism of weapons²⁰.

3. *The Great Awakening*

Many observers have argued that so-called Wokism represents a secularized reworking of the great religious awakenings that have periodically shaken American society, sometimes referred to, with sarcasm, as the 'Great Awakening'²¹. I find this interpretive framework heuristically persuasive. Wokism was, first and foremost, an intense emotional surge that quickly generated its own Byzantine theology, rituals often opaque to outsiders, and, above all, a pronounced intolerance directed not so much at the supposed enemies of the 'Great Liberation Project' as at internal heretics. As with many religious movements that evolve into institutionalized churches, this process also produced a new hierarchy, within which it is often difficult to distinguish genuine

¹⁷ See above, footnote 4.

¹⁸ Chris Rufo Floats Calling in Troops, *Chronicle of Higher Education* Podcast, March 2025, <<https://www.chronicle.com/podcast/college-matters-from-the-chronicle/chris-rufo-floats-calling-in-troops>>.

¹⁹ Vivek Ramaswamy, Groyperism Isn't Conservatism. It's Anti-Americanism, *The New York Times*, December 17, 2025, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/12/17/opinion/republican-identity-divide.html>>.

²⁰ Emma Petit, With Charlie Kirk's Killing, a New Chapter of the Campus Speech Wars Has Begun, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 17, 2025, <<https://www.chronicle.com/article/with-charlie-kirks-killing-a-new-chapter-of-the-campus-speech-wars-has-begun>>.

²¹ John McWhorter, *Woke Racism: How a New Religion Has Betrayed Black America* (New York: Portfolio, 2021). In general, for the historiographical tradition that interprets American history as marked by recurring cycles of moral and religious revival, see William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America, 1607-1977* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

conviction from strategic opportunism. For those, like myself, who work on religious history, these dynamics have offered a fascinating spectacle.

Anyone who has spent time in the humanities departments of American universities in recent years can attest to how difficult it became, in the period leading up to Trump's second presidency, to challenge Woke orthodoxy, even from positions on the left. At the same time, the notion of 'cancel culture', coined largely by the right and initially applied to entertainment, the visual arts, and literature, cannot be applied mechanically to the academic world. The relatively few cases in which careers were effectively destroyed because of ideas expressed too freely and amplified through social media were more exceptional than structural²². Nevertheless, it is hard to deny that those who did not participate in the ideological fervor of recent years were often marginalized by institutional leadership and, in some cases, disadvantaged in access to research funding. It is equally difficult to deny that DEI policies have at times prioritized identity over academic quality, both in hiring and in funding decisions. Taken together, these dynamics fostered a form of gray conformity, in which those who held dissenting views often chose silence, whether out of opportunism or simply in the interest of preserving institutional peace.

The prevailing feeling among many was that the peak of irrationality had been reached and that, as often happens after bursts of collective enthusiasm, like after a storm, one might hope for a sunny day, with clearer skies and purer air, following the destructive fury of wind and rain. We will see whether Trump's re-election will breathe new life into this movement, particularly among those who continue to present themselves as social justice warriors under the protection of their institutions. What is striking, in my view, is the disconcerting speed with which universities removed any reference to their DEI programs from their websites within a matter of days – a reaction that reveals the performative character of many of these initiatives. What is certain is that instead of the sunny day we could have hoped for, a new dark period has begun.

Precisely, for this reason, it is essential to undertake a self-critical reflection on what has occurred over the past fifteen years, avoiding the Manichean narrative that casts the country's political divisions as a struggle between good and evil. I begin with DEI policies because they lie at the center of the most intense controversies. The rapid institutionalization of these policies in American universities is often presented as the result of moral pressure from below and as a response to demographic change in the United States. Although these factors have undoubtedly played a role, they do not explain the specific form DEI has taken, the functions it now performs within academic institutions, or why it has become ideologically and propagandistically advantageous to attack it.

²² For a documented case, see Robert Shibley, *One Georgetown Law Professor Fired, One Resigns after Conversation about Black Students' Academic Performance Accidentally Recorded*, *Foundation for Individual Rights in Education*, 18 March 2021, <<https://www.thefire.org/news/one-georgetown-law-professor-fired-one-resigns-after-conversation-about-black-students>>.

The first point to note is the conspicuous absence of class from the American debate. This omission is hardly accidental. The tragic history of slavery and, above all, racial segregation has inextricably intertwined race and class in the United States. Yet it is difficult to deny that systemic racism in the country rests most firmly on the profound economic inequality that dramatically characterizes American society. In my view, it is above all the weakness of the welfare state that leaves large segments of the population in an intolerable condition and reinforces a rigid social hierarchy. Rather than addressing the need for a more equitable redistribution of wealth, neoliberal policies in recent decades have tended to interpret social problems almost exclusively through the prism of gender and ‘race’, a term I use, with some discomfort, in the specifically American sense²³. The solution adopted has been to systematize the old idea of the ‘American dream’, promoting limited upward mobility for some while leaving the underlying structure of inequality largely intact.

Moreover, even moving from general issues of American Society to the specific impact on universities, it is undeniable that DEI policies have offered a language of inclusion that has allowed institutions to build a progressive image, without programmatically aiming to alter the material conditions in which academic work is produced. While gender and ‘race’ have become qualifying factors for university recruitment and careers, in recent years tenured positions have declined, doctoral programs have been reduced, and teaching has been increasingly outsourced to precarious staff. This structural fragility has been particularly evident in doctoral admission policies. In 2025, a growing number of research universities have suspended or drastically reduced access to doctoral programs in the humanities and social sciences. For example, Boston University suspended admissions to many humanities and social science Ph.D. programs, citing financial sustainability and program reviews as reasons for the pause in admissions²⁴. At the University of Chicago, most Arts & Humanities and several social sciences Ph.D. programs will pause or reduce admissions for the 2026-27 academic year amid budgetary pressures²⁵. Similarly, Harvard University announced significant reductions in Ph.D. admissions, with cuts ranging from about 60 percent in arts and humanities to up to 75 percent in some sci-

²³ For the debate that led to the abolition of the term ‘race’ from all Italian public administrative documents, see Olga Rickards and Gianfranco Biondi, Abolito il termine ‘razza’ da tutti i documenti pubblici grazie a un appello uscito su *Scienza in rete*, *Scienza in rete*, June 6, 2023: <<https://www.scienzainrete.it/articolo/abolito-termini-razza-da-tutti-documenti-pubblici-grazie-appello-uscito-su-scienza-rete>>.

²⁴ Sean Salai, Boston University Suspends Ph.D. Admissions in Humanities, *The Washington Times*, November 22, 2024, <<https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2024/nov/22/boston-university-suspends-ph-d-admissions-humanit/>>.

²⁵ Ryan Quinn, More UChicago Ph.D. Programs Pause Admissions in Humanities, Social Sciences, *Inside Higher Ed*, August 21, 2025, <<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/admissions/graduate/2025/08/21/more-uchicago-phd-programs-will-pause-admissions>>.

ence programs over the next two years, as part of broader budget realignments²⁶.

Presented as temporary measures or simple recalibrations, these actions actually signal a profound shift in institutional priorities: doctoral education, once central to the mission of research universities, is increasingly treated as a cost to be contained rather than a structural investment.

However, this contraction is not a sudden phenomenon, nor can it be viewed in isolation. It is part of a long-term trajectory in which American universities have progressively eroded stable academic employment, replacing tenured positions with precarious work and concentrating resources and opportunities in an increasingly small number of institutions and strategic sectors. Teaching is increasingly entrusted to non-tenured staff, often lacking job security, adequate compensation, and a real voice in governance. The result is a systematic decoupling of teaching, research, and long-term intellectual investment. At the same time that doctoral channels were narrowing and academic work was becoming more precarious, universities were investing heavily in diversity training, inclusive language policies, and representational initiatives. These efforts often reflected sincere ethical commitments. However, they also revealed the limits of administration-led reform. Inclusion at the level of symbols and discourse can coexist, without friction, with disinvestment at the level of institutional reproduction. With class effectively removed from the equation, the horizon of these policies became entirely identity-based. This logic is particularly visible in debates over university admissions. With remarkable candor, some have explicitly argued that using social class as the primary basis for admissions preferences would result in the nation's colleges being «flush with poor white students». Language that, in any country other than the United States, would be widely regarded as unacceptable²⁷. In sum, my sense is that DEI policies have largely been an investment in image, but that, by their very nature, they could not address the structural problems of the country and its universities. I have found that a debate has begun in recent months, albeit with some difficulty, about what these policies have actually achieved. In December 2025, for example, a lengthy essay by Jacob Savage, *The Lost Generation*, proposed a generational reading of the effects of DEI policies, highlighting how, since the mid-2010s, a significant portion of white male millennials have experienced a structural closure of professional opportunities in the cultural, journalistic, and academic sectors. The central thesis of this article, which appeared in *Compact*, a U.S. magazine that could be described as progressive in inspiration, is that this exclusion has been concentrated mainly at entry levels and

²⁶ Jessica Blake, Harvard Slashes Admissions for Ph.D. Candidates, *Inside Higher Ed*, October 22, 2025, <<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/quick-takes/2025/10/22/harvard-slashes-admissions-phd-candidates>>.

²⁷ On the claim that class-based admissions *could* result in colleges being «flush with poor white students», see Nikole Hannah-Jones, Affirmative Action Refocused, *Guernica: A Magazine of Art & Politics*, June 27, 2013, <<https://www.guernicamag.com/nikole-hannah-jones-affirmative-action-refocused/>>.

that, in a dramatically shrinking academic labor market, it has produced a ‘lost generation’ of young white men who have been unable to secure tenure-track positions. To cite just one of the many examples Savage uses to support his argument, at Harvard white men still make up about 55 percent of the Arts and Sciences faculty, but this figure largely reflects hires made in previous eras (Baby Boomers and Generation X). In tenure-track positions, which represent the pipeline for future faculty, their presence has fallen from 49 percent in 2014 to 27 percent in 2024, and from 39 percent to 21 percent in the humanities alone. The essay does not accuse those who have benefited from this system, as the right often does. On the contrary, it interprets these data as the result of a conscious political choice: at a moment when the university system was drastically reducing the number of stable positions available, this investment in institutional image had a particularly strong impact on younger generations²⁸. *The Lost Generation* is particularly significant because it shows how the debate on DEI, meritocracy, and academic freedom is finally struggling to move beyond the traditional binary opposition between supporters of a more inclusive university on the one hand and reactionaries on the other²⁹.

4. Presentism, identity politics, and the epistemological crisis of the humanities

Another issue at the center of the anti-intellectual rhetoric associated with Trump is the alleged lack of freedom of discussion. It is obviously risky to make naïve generalizations, but, in my view, there is little doubt that U.S. universities, and especially humanities departments, have increasingly ceased to be

²⁸ Jacob Savage, *The Lost Generation*, *Compact Magazine*, December 15, 2025, <<https://www.compactmag.com/article/the-lost-generation/>>. The article circulated widely on social media and was shared on X by U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance; for early reactions, see Emma Pettit, *Is Academe Discriminating Against White Men? A Viral Article Has Everyone Talking, and Arguing*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, December 2025, <<https://www.chronicle.com/article/is-academe-discriminating-against-white-men>>, and Christopher F. Rufo, *DEI and the Lost Generation*, December 2025, <<https://christopherrufo.com/p/dei-and-the-lost-generation>>. For a census-based rebuttal, see Matt Bruenig, *What Does the Census Data Say About ‘The Lost Generation’? Savage Appears Wrong, but the Reality Is Potentially Bleaker*, *People’s Policy Project*, December 17, 2025, <<https://www.peoplespolicyproject.org/2025/12/17/what-does-the-census-data-say-about-the-lost-generation/>>, arguing that the claim of a materially ‘lost generation’ of thirty-something white men is largely unfounded, since education and employment outcomes have remained stable or improved at the aggregate level, and that the backlash instead reflects the symbolic and psychological effects of DEI rhetoric concentrated in elite cultural and academic institutions rather than broad economic displacement.

²⁹ Another article published in the same journal, from a more conservative perspective, advances a provocative and highly contentious thesis that as women become the majority in key institutions, feminine norms reshape those institutions in ways that undermine tolerance for conflict, meritocracy, and core institutional functions: Helen Andrews, *The Great Feminization*, *Compact Magazine*, October 16, 2025, <<https://www.compactmag.com/article/the-great-feminization/>>. On the slipperiness and difficulty of using ‘merit’ as a category, see the recent book by Pasquale Terracciano, *I capaci e i meritevoli. Storia filosofica del merito* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2025).

spaces for free discussion and the open exchange of ideas. Debate is often expected to be sanitized in advance. Paradoxically, however, in an almost perfectly bipartisan manner, both liberals or ‘woke’ academics and figures on the right contest the limits placed on their respective freedoms, yet no one seems any longer to believe that freedom is always the freedom of others. In doing so, they forget that freedom of opinion is either radical and universal, or it does not exist at all. Long gone are the days when America represented, in the world’s imagination, the country in which even the most obnoxious ideas were protected by the First Amendment (a principle that, for many in my generation, was memorably illustrated by the ‘Nazis of Illinois’ in *The Blues Brothers*).

In this respect, while the implications of the current situation have been widely discussed, one aspect would seem to deserve closer attention: the extent to which recent transformations in the institutional and intellectual environment of the humanities have coincided with a weakening of shared disciplinary norms. Over the past decade in the United States, an increasing emphasis on moral positioning and present-oriented relevance has often gone hand in hand with a loosening of methodological expectations. Good intentions are more readily taken at face value, and moral alignment with contemporary concerns has, at times, been allowed to compensate for deficiencies in basic scholarly practice, including careful source criticism, linguistic competence, and sustained engagement with existing scholarship.

It would be misleading, however, to attribute this development to a single cause. The marginalization of philological rigor cannot be explained exclusively as the product of ideological pressure. It is also shaped by structural and pedagogical factors: the uneven transmission of basic skills, the acceleration of academic production, and evaluation systems that tend to reward originality of thesis more than solidity of method. At the same time, the growing tendency to assess historical work primarily through the lens of its ethical or political positioning has contributed to redefining what counts as scholarly adequacy, often shifting attention away from questions of evidence, precision, and argumentation.

What matters, in this context, is less the priority of one factor over the other than the way in which these tendencies increasingly converge. As methodological demands recede, the capacity of historical scholarship to subject ideologically charged narratives to critical scrutiny is correspondingly weakened. Conversely, when moral or political alignment becomes a primary criterion of evaluation, methodological shortcomings are more easily overlooked or normalized. The result is a progressive erosion of the shared epistemic ground on which historical debate depends, and with it a diminished ability of the discipline to distinguish between interpretation and assertion, analysis and affirmation.

In the final part of this article, and from the necessarily partial perspective of a historian, I will briefly refer to a few impressionistic and anecdotal examples that are intended to illustrate, rather than explain, this broader tendency. They are not meant to function as evidence in themselves, nor to offer a sys-

tematic account, but to exemplify, in a limited and necessarily partial way, the dynamics outlined above. Read in this sense, they touch on questions of respect for sources and linguistic competence, the integrity of historical records in the digital era, the ethics of the historical profession itself, and institutional and pedagogical practices.

While in Europe historiography is still often marked by a lingering positivism, with an excessive emphasis on sources, in the United States an approach that privileges the articulation of an innovative thesis has long been favored, sometimes supported by the selective use, and even bending, of sources in a manner presented as unbiased. Stated in this way, the contrast is obviously simplistic and misleading. Every historian, even the most positivist, consciously or unconsciously begins research motivated by a problem to which he or she seeks an answer, and every historian, even the most rigorous scholar, necessarily selects sources, which are then interpreted. At the risk of making an unfair generalization about many serious American colleagues who continue to work with great rigor, it nonetheless seems undeniable to me that, over the past decade, a form of pedagogical historiography has emerged in the United States that often uses the past rhetorically to address the present, while dispensing with the historiographical tools that have been associated with serious historical inquiry since at least the nineteenth century³⁰.

The global turn that has characterized the field of historical research over the last twenty years has been innovative and refreshing. From a historiographical perspective, it represented a healthy shake-up of the discipline, moving it away from a narrowly Eurocentric framework. After some years, however, and without prejudice, it is difficult not to notice how, especially in the United States over the past decade, global history has also generated a backlash. De-centering Europe – or, as they say in the departments of the world's most powerful imperial state, 'decolonizing the curriculum' – has too often functioned as a license to circumvent language skills and the careful, self-conscious use of sources. Reading Braudel's great frescoes, one is struck not only by their narrative power and interpretive audacity, but also by the breadth and depth of the research that underlies them³¹. This is something that can rarely be said of many of the more recent books that reinterpret history in a global dimension. Some of the historians associated with the global turn – Cornell Fleischer, Cemal Kafadar, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam – spoke out very effectively and brutally in 2020 about how global history should not be written in a scathing review of a book that showed all the limitations of a book presenting a thesis unsubstantiated by sources. The fact that they chose the unusual formula of a

³⁰ Stefano Villani, *Liberarsi dal passato. Alcune note a proposito delle polemiche sul 'presentismo' in America*, *Prometeo. Rivista trimestrale di scienze e storia*, 40/160 (dicembre 2022), pp. 78-83.

³¹ For how Fernand Braudel (1902-1985) reshaped historical method through his emphasis on spatialized processes and the *longue durée*, anticipating approaches later formalized in global history, see André Burguière, *The Annales School: An Intellectual History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), pp. 181-212.

six-handed review demonstrated the militant intent of this essay, which can rightly be interpreted as a defense of historical epistemology³². Since then, things have, if possible, grown worse. Two years later, a series of harsh reviews showed even non-experts in the field the dramatic structural weaknesses of a book published by Yale University Press, still considered one of the most prestigious publishing houses in the world, and by an assistant professor at Yale University. Again, they documented systematic mistranslations and naive interpretations of archival sources, combined with a systematic lack of interaction with existing secondary literature, especially non-English language sources³³. The author, apparently unshaken by the criticism, wrote a response in which she effectively dismissed the criticism as pedantic and irrelevant³⁴.

I mention the debate on these two books because it took place in public and with much fanfare. To demonstrate the seriousness of what I believe to be a real epistemological crisis, one could add the emergence of certain practices that undermine the epistemological foundations of the discipline proposed by institutions that, in theory, should be of excellence. Some university libraries of highly prestigious American institutions, for example, have explicitly encouraged scholars to select citations based on the author's identity, treating footnotes as a mechanism for symbolic redistribution³⁵. I delude myself that it is not necessary to explain to any serious historian how these 'inclusive citation' initiatives represent a real denial of the function of bibliographical references. Selecting sources on ideological or identity grounds abandons the discipline in favor of ideology.

³² Cornell Fleischer, Cemal Kafadar, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *How to write fake global history*, CROMOHS – *Cyber Review of Modern Historiography*, 2000, <<https://doi.org/10.13128/cromohs-12032>>.

³³ George Zhijian Qiao, Was There an Administrative Revolution?, *Journal of Chinese History*, 8, 2023, pp. 147-166, <<https://doi.org/10.1017/jch.2023.19>>; Ben Raab, Peer Colleagues Slam History Professor's Book for 'Systemically' Misrepresenting Sources, *Yale Daily News*, October 26, 2023; Bradly Reed, Reed on Dykstra, *Uncertainty in the Empire of Routine: The Administrative Revolution of the Eighteenth-Century Qing State*, *H-Net Reviews*: <<https://networks.h-net.org/group/reviews/20007641/reed-dykstra-uncertainty-empire-routine-administrative-revolution-eighteenth>>; Macabe Keliher, Review of *Uncertainty in the Empire of Routine: The Administrative Revolution of the Eighteenth-Century Qing State*, by Maura Dykstra, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 34, 2024, 1, pp. 266-270, <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1356186323000469>>.

³⁴ Maura Dykstra, Response to George Qiao's Review of *Uncertainty in the Empire of Routine: The Administrative Revolution of the Eighteenth-Century Qing State*, *Journal of Chinese History*, 2023, pp. 1-13, <<https://doi.org/10.1017/jch.2023.35>>.

³⁵ Jodi Coalter, Citation for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion: Home: Helping students and faculty incorporate more diversity, equity, and inclusion into their research using library resources, Michigan State University Libraries, <<https://libguides.lib.msu.edu/CitationHome/Intro>>; Sarah Clark, Caroline Monnin, More than Style Guides. Incorporating Citation Justice within Citation Instruction, in Dawn M. Muller (ed.), *Democratizing Knowledge + Access + Opportunities*, Minneapolis Conference Proceedings, April 2-5, 2005 (Chicago: American Library Association, 2025), pp. 471-482, <<https://www.ala.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/MorethanStyleGuides.pdf>>; Sheila Craft-Morgan, Citation Justice. How librarians can improve equity in measuring research impact, *American Libraries Magazine*, <<https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2024/06/03/citational-justice/>>.

Similarly, I was personally very impressed by the decision taken on June 9, 2021, by the American Historical Association, according to which authors who have changed legal identity may, upon request, have the names under which they publish corrected «in the digital versions of the association's publications» (including, it should be noted, the highly prestigious *American Historical Review*), while establishing that, «to protect the author's privacy, this correction shall not be noted in the article or on the web page». It is clear that this measure was designed to eliminate the so-called 'deadnaming' of trans scholars. There is no doubt that the new name should be accepted in a spirit of respect for each person's human and personal journey³⁶. However, the idea that an association of historians does not feel the need to report, even in a footnote, a change to past data clearly conflicts with the very ethics of the historical profession. In a context where a growing number of publications exist exclusively in digital format, this accepts the possibility of retroactively modifying the past for ideological reasons, without leaving any trace of the intervention. I don't think there is anything more trite than invoking Orwell, but it is difficult not to recognize that accepting the principle that already published texts can be changed without reporting it inevitably paves the way for further deletions or rewrites³⁷.

The examples I have mentioned are clearly impressionistic, but they point to the dangerous path that the historical disciplines have taken. Historical inquiry is reduced to the moral and political categories of the present, thus eroding the temporal distance on which historical understanding is based. The past is often interpreted as a moral archive of oppression and resistance, in which historical actors are evaluated primarily on the basis of their proximity to present norms, rather than within the constraints and possibilities of their contexts. This 'presentist' reduction of historical complexity to a form of rhetoric that serves contemporary political demands, whether on the right or the 'left', ultimately unites the censorial attitudes of both³⁸. A humanistic culture oriented toward moral validation rather than historical explanation is structurally ill-equipped to defend its autonomy in the face of political intervention. If historical research is reduced to rhetoric, it becomes indistinguishable from ideology and therefore vulnerable to counter-ideological capture³⁹.

³⁶ American Historical Association, Policy on Author Name Changes, *Perspectives on History*, 2025, <<https://www.historians.org/news-publications/perspectives-on-history/about/aha-policy-on-author-name-changes/>>.

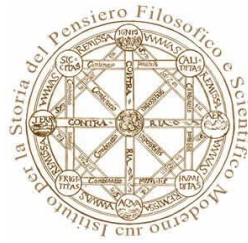
³⁷ Somewhat connected to this issue, there is also a need for a frank discussion of the fragility of knowledge that exists only in digital form. The cyberattack on the British Library in October 2023, should have served as a wake-up call about the risks inherent in the over-reliance on digital-only preservation. See Frances Jones, 'No one seems to care': scholars decry plight of British Library, *Research Professional News*, December 8, 2025, <<https://www.researchprofessionalnews.com/rr-news-uk-charities-and-societies-2025-12-no-one-seems-to-care-scholars-decry-plight-of-british-library>>.

³⁸ S. Villani, *Liberarsi dal passato*, cit.

³⁹ This is not the place to address the issue in detail, but as a final note to an article that discusses questions of academic freedom in a changing institutional landscape, it is difficult to ignore the impact that artificial intelligence is already having on higher education. In the United States in particular, the rapid spread of tools such as ChatGPT has exposed serious weaknesses

To conclude, I would argue that while it is undeniable that the measures taken during Trump's second term are causing considerable damage to the U.S. higher education system, what we are witnessing is primarily a symptom of a systemic crisis with much deeper roots. In conclusion, this broad overview has aimed to show how the measures taken during Trump's second term are inflicting severe and lasting damage on the American higher education system, a development whose consequences will extend well beyond the United States. At the same time, and perhaps less visibly to European scholars, this damage is unfolding in an educational landscape already marked by a profound systemic crisis, particularly in the humanities, one that will require more than a simple change of administration to address.

in assessment practices, in systems that lack oral examinations and that, especially after the pandemic, rely heavily on online written work. Beyond cases of plagiarism, however, the growing use of AI is beginning to alter the conditions under which knowledge is produced and transmitted, at a moment already marked by what may be described as an epistemic crisis in the humanities. At the same time, these transformations risk facilitating the uncontrolled circulation of simplified, distorted, or openly toxic narratives that are no longer filtered through adequate critical or disciplinary frameworks. For a recent discussion of these issues, Ronald Purser, AI Is Destroying the University and Learning Itself, *Current Affairs*, 1 December 2025, <<https://www.currentaffairs.org/news/ai-is-destroying-the-university-and-learning-itself>> (originally published in the magazine's Nov./Dec. 2025 print edition).



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– The University as a Battleground: Politics, Identity, and Knowledge in the United States

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the transformation of American universities into a central political battleground over the past decade, focusing on the intersection of federal policy, identity politics, and the production of knowledge. Tracing developments from Donald Trump's first presidency through his second term, it analyzes the impact of executive intervention in research funding, the dismantling of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion policies, and the narrowing of academic freedom, particularly in relation to debates over Israel, antisemitism, and student protest. The article also situates these developments within a broader intellectual context, arguing that the crisis of academic freedom cannot be understood without reference to deeper epistemological tensions within the humanities, including presentism, identity-driven scholarship, and the erosion of disciplinary norms. Rather than framing recent events as an isolated authoritarian turn, the essay interprets them as symptoms of a longer-term structural crisis affecting the American university system.

KEYWORDS

American universities; Academic freedom; Identity politics; Trump administration; Presentism

SOMMARIO

L'università come terreno di scontro: politica, identità e saperi negli U.S.A. L'articolo analizza come progressivamente le università statunitensi siano diventate un terreno di scontro politico, descrivendo in particolare gli intrecci tra politiche federali, questioni di identità e produzione del sapere. In particolare l'autore, prendendo in esame le politiche sull'università dalla prima alla seconda presidenza Trump, menziona gli interventi sui finanziamenti alla ricerca, lo smantellamento delle politiche di Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) e la restrizione degli spazi di libertà accademica, in particolare nel contesto delle proteste studentesche e dei dibattiti su Israele e l'antisemitismo. Questi fenomeni vengono però collocati all'interno di una crisi epistemologica più ampia delle discipline umanistiche, caratterizzata da presentismo, conformismo e indebolimento del rigore filologico. L'articolo sostiene che le attuali tensioni non rappresentano una rottura improvvisa, ma il risultato di processi strutturali di lungo periodo che stanno ridefinendo il ruolo dell'università negli Stati Uniti.

PAROLE CHIAVE

Università statunitensi; Libertà accademica; Politiche identitarie; Amministrazione Trump; Presentismo