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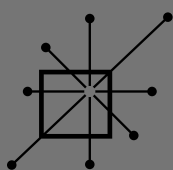
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A Reactionary History? Reflections on the De-Democratization of the Past in the "Trump Era" United States



# A Reactionary History? Reflections on the De-Democratization of the Past in the “Trump Era” United States

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**Abstract**

The present text aims to propose a few hypotheses about the current de-democratization of the past in the United States of the Trump Age, from the standpoint of a case study of anti-Critical Race Theory (CRT) laws approved by the Republican Party in a series of states and their assault on the honest judgment of the US history of slavery and racial violence. The text concludes that this assault is part of a larger process of political de-democratization that aims to, among other things, redefine the links between history and the polis in order to legitimize the “exit from democracy” currently underway in the country.

**Keywords**

Negationism. Historical Denialism. Uses of history. American historiography.



People who shut their eyes to reality simply invite their own destruction, and anyone who insists on remaining in a state of innocence long after that innocence is dead turns himself into a monster (Baldwin, 2012, p. 178).

## Introduction

In April 2022, Ron DeSantis, the Republican governor of Florida, celebrated the defeat of "political correctness" in his state. House Bill 7 (HB7), which radically limited the teaching of history in local schools, had just been approved by legislators to great fanfare: in the so-called Sunshine State, DeSantis proclaimed, children would not be "indoctrinated" to hate the nation, much less subjected to the "far-left agenda" that "dominated" educational institutions in the rest of the country (Florida, 2022). Against this "trend," HB7 was seen as a "liberation" of youth from the clutches of the new bogeymen of the American right, the Critical Race Theory (frequently referred to as CRT) and the 1619 Project promoted by *The New York Times*. The new law severely limited debate on slavery, segregation and social inequality in Florida classrooms, reducing it to mere "teaching of facts" and "viewpoints" consistent with "individual liberty" rather than the "collective guilt" putatively promoted by other approaches. According to the legislation, no one could be discriminated against according to "their origin," nor should they be "forced" to "feel anguish or guilt" for the deeds of their "ancestors," especially since, in the peculiar lens of the text, the reasons for the successes and failures of their ancestors were solely their "individual merit" and "hard work" (Florida, 2022).

The Florida law was not the only one: all across the United States, Republican conservatives<sup>1</sup> proposed and/or approved similar initiatives (even reaching the Congress) to *restrict or prohibit* the teaching of certain topics, particularly those linked to the country's racially violent past and present. In the wake of the great anti-racist demonstrations of 2020 and the transformations of the national memorial landscape and historical imagination stimulated by the removal of Confederate monuments and by the 1619 Project, Republicans moved, literally into *reaction*, not so much to propose alternative representations of the past in the "free market of ideas," but to *restrain*, by force, its proliferation. This right-winger *emotional investment* in the past

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1 In the US, the term "conservative" is usually used to refer to positions that maintain as their central focus a fundamentalist adherence to free market capitalism, exacerbated cultural nationalism, a deference to white supremacy (sometimes explicit, sometimes timid) and a deep social reactionism, especially with regard to sexuality and gender issues. More recently, as Cox Richardson (2020) demonstrates, conservatives concentrated in the Republican Party and radicalized by Trumpism, have made the attack on representative democracy one of their most visible modes of operation. For this reason, throughout this text I use the term "conservative" to refer to this ideological amalgam.



is, of course, not new: they were strident during the famous history wars of the 80s and 90s, when they raised their voices against exhibitions, curricula, and narratives they considered “insulting” to the homeland (Avila, 2021). However, despite the virulence, their responses at the time rarely penetrated institutional political domains, remaining, for the most part, within the discursive sphere. Thirty years later, however, things have changed: emboldened by Donald Trump’s victory in 2016, the conservatives were willing to *change the rules of the game* in order to, in the long run, establish their images of the past as the only acceptable ones, at least in public institutions of learning. Emotional investment alone was no longer sufficient: a broad political offensive was now essential to achieve their objectives.

This political offensive is thus part of a larger process of political de-democratization, widely documented and analyzed by authors such as Sheldon Wolin (2016), Wendy Brown (2019) and Heather Cox Richardson (2020), which has reached its current peak with the authoritarian desires and impulses of Trumpism, as well as the public legitimacy crisis in historiography itself as a discipline, increasingly subjected to external impositions, institutional disarray, and the evacuation of its pedagogical and civic justifications (Avila, 2021). This perfect storm has created, as will be seen, conditions for the *de-democratization of the past* permeating the US scenario, and not only there: I believe that, notwithstanding obvious particular contexts, this can be understood as part of a more *general* scenario, what Achille Mbembe (2017) called the “global exit from democracy.” There is, therefore, a *method* at work. This article seeks to probe that method through a case study of the US context.

In the United States, this artifice involves the (de)mobilization of the past to construct a “society of enmity” (Mbembe, 2017) that permanently excludes large segments of the population, relegating them to second-hand citizenship (if any at all!), and redefining the ties between history and the polis such that the former plays a central role in the long-awaited *symbolic re-founding* of the nation. And this is where the concomitance occurs: the public legitimacy crisis of historiography as a discipline plays an operational role for the de-democratization of the past, even if it wasn’t initiated by it, and goes beyond serving merely as an auxiliary to this operation. To de-democratize one must delegitimize; to delegitimize it is necessary to de-democratize: this is the vicious cycle instituted by the reactionary assault against certain pasts, figures, and institutions. In the current conjuncture this “infernal cycle” (Mbembe, 2017) therefore poses inevitable obstacles to the “public life of history,” to quote Dipesh Chakrabarty (2008). The question posed by the Indian historian in light of the advance of Hindu fascism remains valid in this context: What “public life” can history have, if it will even continue to have one worthy of the name?



## Some Conjectures

With this in mind, I'd like to go ahead and offer some conjectures (I'm not sure that I have the audacity to call them "hypotheses") that guide these lines, as a kind of theoretical map for the reader. Firstly, as I have already stated, I consider the de-democratization of the past an effect of the political de-democratization ravaging the globe under the dual aegis of neoliberal-neoconservatism and that, in the United States, is merged with a Republican Party given over to Trumpism. There the "demonization of the social and the political" (Brown, 2019, p. 7), widely spread by neoliberalism over the last few decades, has flowed into the current antidemocratic torrent, in which the concept of a "people" (and those who legitimately belong to it) is used to strengthen, if not *permanently* concretize, a "bestial political form" (Brown, 2019, p. 84) analogous to the society of enmity described by Mbembe<sup>2</sup>. In its course of devastation, this Frankenstein monster necessarily advances against that pact between democratization and historiography that, in the observation of Valdeci Araújo (2017, p. 195), marked modern history, especially from the second half of the twentieth century. In that context, the tacit but unstable alliance between academic historiography and the demands of subaltern/dominated groups was crucial to the expansion of topics, objects and methodological perspectives that *reformed* the discipline, within various theoretical limits.

In the United States, this period coincides with the rise of social history to the status of "cultural dominance" (Johnson, 2011, p. 23) in the Clio workshops: in Carl Degler's (1987) famous conclusion, the discipline of historiography was "remade" in these years by expanding its scope to include a whole range of subjects and themes hitherto marginalized within the discipline. If, on the one hand, such expansion led to incessant (and tedious) jeremiads against the "fragmentation of history" (Tyrrell, 2005), on the other it undeniably *opened* the discipline to more plural representations of the past or, perhaps better said, less restricted in their objects. Likewise, Walter Johnson (2011, pp. 8-30) points out, this generated its acute *politicization*, quite noticeable in the abundant redefinitions of its social and public role during the 1960s and 1970s. However, for the conservatives, this was a transgression, an "illegitimate democratic excess" (Wolin, 2016, p. 331) equivalent to the undue expansion of civil and social rights in the 1960s, which needed to be

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<sup>2</sup> For Brown (2019, p. 11-12), this political form is characterized by a combination of "uninhibited bellicosity"; suppression of the political rights of "dangerous minorities"; private life intervention in the name of religious beliefs; extreme nationalism; the hollowing out of electoral rituals; the concentration of real political decision-making power in the hands of a few individuals; economic hyper-concentration; militarization of internal security forces; normalization of inequality; reinforcement of white supremacy; and the evisceration of the welfare state — in other words, the "conjunction of neoliberal reason, resentful masculinity, nationalism, undeclared nihilism" (Brown, 2019, p. 11) and "democracy managed by unlimited corporate power" (Wolin, 2017, pp. 136-137), which underpins Trumpism.



corrected for the sake of the “reunification” of America — a viewpoint that spread with the history wars of the 1990s, especially when social history found itself thrown into the media storm. Against this backdrop, Jill Lepore (2010, pp. 152-165) argues that there was a consolidation of both the *reorganization of the past* sought by the right, with all its normative and exclusionary baggage, and a violent rhetoric *delegitimizing the discipline* as, in the words of a Trumpist ideological document, a “hotbed of anti-Americanism” (The President’s Advisory 1776 Commission, 2021, p. 27).

Secondly, I believe it is not possible to dissociate these de-democratizing phenomena from the crisis of the nation-state, which, according to Mbembe (2021, p. 111), engenders compensatory “regressive nationalisms” driven by *desires for segregation and revenge*. In this “combustion of the world,” the “old imperialist impulses now combine with nostalgia and melancholy” (Mbembe, 2021, p. 24) to feed identity-based essentialisms, venomous sensitivities, and the absolutization of the Other as perpetual enemy or unassimilable stranger. The result, as we’ll see, is a (lethal?) combination of a cult of glorious ancestors with narcissistic narratives and the erasure of anything that might disturb the positive self-image of the community of peers. To be effective, these regressive nationalisms revive “national romances founded on resentment” (Dardot *et al.*, 2021, p. 216) in order to *IMAGINATIVELY SOLVE* the crisis of which they are an effect, projecting the recovery of a lost supremacy through revenge against those reputedly responsible for the fall from the national Eden (Brown, 2019, pp. 35-36; Scott, 2018). The nation thus becomes an extremely circumscribed locus: there are those who are *in it* but not *of it*, and who, for this reason, need to be constantly monitored and denounced for the dangers they pose to the national collective. The monomaniacal reactionary “culture war” against the “politically correct left” and the anti-CRT laws are, in the United States, a clear externalization of this despair, rooted in a sometimes unconfessed anti-Black racism, for whom “making America great again” means making it exclusively white: a return (of the repressed?) to an idea of nation as an “organic imperative” (Gilroy, 2007, p. 93) based on the infrahumanization of those outside the “familiar narrative of the imagined community” (Gilroy, 2007, p. 107).

Hence my third deduction: these de-democratizing operations aim to block any policies, even minimally symbolic ones, of recognition and reparations in relation to slavery and the subjacent/subsequent regimes of racial terror that reimposed the “racial contract” (Mills, 1997, p. 72) based on a violent reiteration of the “color line” (Du Bois, 1998) for the 21st century United States. It is no coincidence that their targets of preference are CRT and the 1619 Project, and that they use the specter of the massive anti-racist protests of 2020 to make people believe that anti-American (read “Black”) subversion is everywhere and promise that social movements such as Black Lives Matter are the antechamber of an anti-white revolution. All of which are





gestures of denial that there is a debt (social, national, temporal) to be settled and, through it, of preserving the status quo anchored in anti-Black racism in which are *inverted* the roles of dominators and dominated, perpetrators and victimized, victors and vanquished: a "tradition of denial" (Balfour, 2011, p. 59) in which the "bloody and terribly oppressive history" (Baldwin, 2012, p. 41) of the republic is replaced by self-congratulatory visions that trivialize its historical wounds and provide ideological support to Trumpist delusions about the innocence of an America surrounded by enemies, against whom there is no option but permanent war. Put differently, the de-democratization of the past, at this point, implies an enormous *lack of responsibility* in relation to the past, comparable to what Charles Mills (1997, pp. 97-100) conceptualized as an "epistemic ignorance" central to the reproduction of the racial contract, and Lewis Gordon (1995, pp. 2-17; 2022, pp. 60-69), drawing from Sartre's notable theorizing, called "bad faith,"<sup>3</sup> and crucial to the "ossification of the world" projected by societies of enmity. In this situation, Mills writes (1997, p. 97), "evasion and self-deception become the epistemic norm": another way of pointing to the ubiquity of historical denialism, albeit disguised these days.

This brings us to the last assumption: the anti-democratic assault on the past aims to produce/affirm new subjectivities to shape a type of citizen, if they remain citizens, in line with the neoliberal reorganization of society, something perceived by Chakrabarty (1992) at the inception of these transformations. For the Indian scholar, late capitalism brought the conflict between the "citizen," the collective subject of democracies, and the "consumer" to its final throes and exposed the growing "loss of sanctity" of the nation-state, noted earlier, in a world given over to exacerbated consumerism and unbridled "globalization" (the vocabulary of the time) (Chakrabarty, 1992). Evidently, none of this has changed: we have not reached the neoliberal "paradise" of lotus-eaters in their blissful oblivion, nor has the modern political animal been devoured by *homo oeconomicus*. *History* continues to matter because *politics* continues to matter. However, the dynamics identified by Chakrabarty have exacerbated in the 21st century. The dispute between the citizen and the consumer is being won by the latter, and the collective-subjects guaranteed by history are giving way to the advance of the atomized, precarious, and "flexible" subjects demanded by neoliberal rationality. The efforts to de-democratize the past in the United States occur at the intersection of the demands for loyalty to an unquestionable collective-subject (the nation) and the insistence

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<sup>3</sup> In this sense, more than a point-blank lie, bad faith means both the "ability to lie to oneself," which requires the (often violent) conformity of reality to various falsehoods (Gordon, 2022, pp. 61-65), as well as the "effort to hide from the responsibilities" that accompany our fundamental human freedom (Gordon, 1995, pp. 8-9). The result is a false existence that nevertheless wants to pass itself off as authentic. To protect itself, Gordon (2022, p. 66) asserts that bad faith must disarm the "evidentiality of the evidence" regarding what it wants to deny, which at times borders on the pathological — and as we will see, starting with the US situation, this is a quite appropriate path of analysis for reflecting on historical denialism in a broader way.



that individuals are not affected by social structures and their legacies. In Joan Scott's analysis (2018), there is no paradox here: the nation is a "*generic product*," anchored in the reiteration of the racial contract, demanding both permanent defense against its usurpers of dark skin and/or barbaric birth and constant sacrifice from its citizen-consumers, for without both it could not achieve ("again," in Trumpist parlance) its due greatness. Between these poles, however, there would only be "hard work," "individual liberty," and "personal merit." In these histories, such as Florida's HB7, the social doesn't exist and politics is merely an exercise of private power, without commitment to the "construction of the common" that, among other things, Wolin (2016, pp. 100-101) sees as the heart of social democracy and indispensable to politics.

We have reached the end of this preamble. If — note the conditional — these propositions are correct, we could witness epochal changes in the ways of thinking, representing, and consuming the past. This would help explain why the time before now has become the *object* and *space* of incessant wars, whose spoils will belong to the victors. A closer examination of the US case provides, I believe, the means to comprehend the breadth of the processes of de-democratization of the past (which are, I repeat, global), the strategies involved, and what is at stake in these clashes — it can, in short, contribute to the "tracking of powers" (Trouillot, 1995, p. 22) involved in this offensive.

## The De-Democratization of America

Let us now turn our attention to the history wars of the Trump Era. The explicit trigger seems to have been the publication by the *New York Times* in August 2019 of the now famous 1619 Project, but as alluded to in the previous pages, the roots can be found in the previous decades. As Daniel Rodgers (2013) and Andrew Hartman (2015) attest, conservative anxiety over the country's demographic changes, the expansion of civil rights, and the rise of "multiculturalism" produced, throughout the 1990s and 2000s, various narratives that, in different formats, emphasized (like Huntington and similar scholars) an essentialized, idealized, nostalgic and, ultimately authoritarian vision of the nation. The "clash of civilizations", in these circumstances, had reached its internal borders and caused the "disunity of America," to recall two popular titles from those years. These prognoses, ranging from the apocalyptic to the pathetic, led to an intensification, on the one hand, of attacks against the "politically correct history" practiced in academia and schools and, on the other, to an explosion in the publication and dissemination of openly reactionary "alternative" histories, such as those manufactured by Dinesh D'Souza, Sean Hannity, Ann Coulter and Glenn Beck, emphasizing a white, innocent, and exceptional "normative America" (Hartman, 2015, pp. 262-263). During the Obama years (2008-2016), Republican right-wing intellectuals and



their think tanks amplified this message regarding the (alleged) destruction of the nation at the hands of the first Black president and his "socialist" allies, helping to create the conditions for the consolidation of a historical imagination even more reactionary than its predecessors, yet feeding on and expanding upon them, equivalent to a kind of "historical fundamentalism" that brooks no challenge, consigning its adversaries to the status of "blasphemers" and "heretics" (Lepore, 2010, p. 16). The responses to the 1619 Project and the moral panic surrounding CRT, together with the subsequent legislative blitzkrieg, evidence this very well.

The *NYT* initiative was inspired both by the fourth centenary of the arrival of the first enslaved people to the shores of Virginia and by the sociopolitical urgency highlighted by the ghosts of Ferguson and Charlottesville: the clash between the massive uprising generated by the accumulated "state of danger" (Hartman, 2008, p. 6) of Black communities and the unrepentant or ashamed white supremacy encouraged by Trump. Starting from these points, the material created by the journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones, who would later win a Pulitzer Prize for this work, was quite ambitious in its scope: to rewrite *the entire* history of the United States through the prism of slavery and its "afterlife" (Hartman, 2008, pp. 6-7). Composed of a series of texts (historiographical and literary) and images from a panorama that extended from the democratic struggles of African Americans to urban planning and US pop culture, the project not only had an express political desire (to use the past to generate possibilities for change in the present), but also turned the old exceptionalist narratives about the nation upside down: America was not the land of the inexorable advance of freedom, but one dedicated to the continued plundering, oppression and segregation of its Black inhabitants — anti-Black racism was inscribed in the "DNA of the nation" (Hannah-Jones, 2020). In Hannah-Jones's assessment (2020), the American ideals so widely touted and exalted were a *lie* until the relentless struggles of African Americans made them *true*. Despite these victories, the specter of the plantations continued to haunt the United States, (in)visible in its rapacious capitalism, prisons and political systems, and would not go away until there was a reckoning with these past-presents. Under these parameters the democratizing pact of history involves the admission of a loss and a lack at the heart of the American experience which, in historiographic representation, assumes the critique of narratives of progress usually blind to the pains of multitudes.

The 1619 Project thesis was not unprecedented (W. E. B. Du Bois had expressed a similar argument at the dawn of the 20th century), but in the face of the "uninterrupted injury" (Hartman, 2002), it remained powerful because it updated the problematic of "abolition democracy" (Du Bois, 1998) and the constitution of a state of *true freedom* for America in the Trump Era, both politically and in historiography. Laid bare by the unbearable state violence against Black people



and the brutal plundering/exploitation of African Americans, the state of danger had reached an unsustainable point. Without directly confronting what had caused its accumulation over time, the “legacy of 1619,” there was no chance for change in the country. This was the project’s message: use history not to “drown in it,” to use Baldwin’s phrase (1993, p. 81), but to offer an argument for the “reparations due” for the enslavement of millions (Hannah-Jones, 2020).

For many right-wing commentators, the 1619 Project accused the United States of being an essentially evil nation, dedicated solely to racism and oppression (of which the nation is innocent) (Avila, 2021). According to these opponents, the *NYT* initiative was nothing more than an anti-American “conspiracy theory” (Guelzo, 2019), designed to incite hatred for the homeland through “large-scale” revisionism (Bacievich, 2020) that attacked the “moral core” (Riley, 2021) of US history. They feared it was one step toward a “cultural revolution” that intended to replace the American Revolution with an insidious “Marxism” (Levin, 2021), all the more dangerous for being disguised as “social justice”. Some of them, in fact, already saw this “revolution” underway in the removal of Confederate memorials from public spaces and in the change in school curricula away from a “patriotic education” capable of sustaining the bonds of devotion and love for the United States. This “erasure of the national past,” a recurrent phrase in the reactionary rhetoric, would be the first chapter in the dissolution of America. With his usual opportunism, Trump summed up these concerns when, in his nationalist harangue on July 4, 2020, delivered at the foot of the iconic Mount Rushmore, he warned his supporters of this omnipresent “threat.” In his paranoid speech, the United States was besieged by radical mobs eager to annihilate the American way of life by defaming its heroes, spreading “false facts” about its past, and indoctrinating young Americans to become “radicals” (Trump, 2020). In response, the billionaire would launch the 1776 Commission, whose purpose was to promote a “patriotic education” that would teach his compatriots to love their land unconditionally.

Fortunately, the commission was disbanded by President Biden hours after his inauguration, though not before releasing the 1776 Report, whose notions of history and “patriotic education” would partly underpin the reactionary offensive against the 1619 Project (and, as we shall see, “Critical Race Theory”) across the United States. The authors, Republican ideologues without any disciplinary credibility, endorsed Trump’s homily at Mount Rushmore, reducing US history to a perennial clash between “American values” and its antagonists, always ready to destroy them, constantly reprised under new forms (The President’s Advisory 1776 Commission, 2021)<sup>4</sup>. The report does not, as one might guess, analyze specific events to confirm (or not) this

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<sup>4</sup> In the text of the 1776 Report, the nation’s enemies are subsequently depicted as slavery, the progressivism of the 1920s, socialism, Soviet communism, and contemporary “identitarianism,” although all of them are presented in



significance, as it is a foregone conclusion seeking a premise and, for this very reason, a symptom of reactionary bad faith. Thus, if history is lacking in the text, ideology abounds: its intention is less to be a judicious assessment of the US past than a piece of nationalist propaganda in service of the Trumpist cause — a call to action, therefore. However, one element was missing for conservatives to transmute this history war into a *moral panic*: they would find it in the "Critical Race Theory," a twin sister (or mother, depending on who is speaking) of the 1619 Project.

Originally configured as a theoretical-political response to the racist structuring of the US legal system, with emphasis on the work of Derrick Bell, Cheryl Harris and Kimberlé Crenshaw, CRT sought primarily to identify the ways in which US institutions perpetuated racial inequality and thereby understand the social constructions of race and its intersection with questions of class and gender, in order to reveal the perpetuation, in the putative neutrality of legal texts, of whiteness as a marker of difference and domination (of which the Republican's response to CRT serves as an example... oh, the irony!) (Delgado & Stefancic, 2011). With this, CRT operated in the classic terrain of critical theories, that is, the proposition of interpretations that could liberate subjects from the circumstances of their oppression, as difficult as that may be. On the other hand, it can also be thought of as an example of the long tradition in Black radicalism of questioning the liberal order and its "incrementalism," extending from pre-Civil War "liberation historiographies" (Ernest, 2004) to the "reparatory histories" (Scott, 2017) offered by initiatives such as the defense of slavery reparations or the 1619 Project. In the assessment of Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (2011, p. 73), CRT is part of the secular fight for true democracy in the US and, thus, part of the modern democratizing pact.

Briefly mentioned in the 1776 Report, CRT would be used by the right not only to excite moral panic, as mentioned earlier, but also as a weapon for controlling the imagination in relation to US history: a mode of "authoritarian framing and normalization of the population" (Dardot *et al.*, 2021, p. 205) integral to the conservative strategy of social reorganization. The deliberately manufactured aspect of the controversy surrounding CRT, its dishonest decontextualization, cynical and shameless political/electoral use by the Republican Party and media orbit are

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caricature and devoid of any historical specificity. In the case of slavery, for example, it is simply considered the antonym of "freedom," without further discussion of its violence or its role in structuring the American economy, precisely because that is what must be repressed in the exceptionalist historical imagination of Trumpism. Similarly, the report makes a spurious connection between the anti-racist protests of the 2010s, seen as an expression of "identity politics" contrary to the "legal equality" enshrined in the Constitution, and the defense of slavery made by Southern ideologues in the first half of the 19th century is considered unsustainable from a historiographical and political point of view. Therefore, if one of the ideological gestures par excellence is the presentation of what is "historically variable" under the guise of the eternal and/or universal (LaCapra, 1989, pp. 148-149), with the consequent creation of fixed and immutable images of reality aimed at reconciling the subject with the social order (Jameson, 1992), then the 1776 Report is pure ideology.



important evidence of this authoritarian disposition, especially when associated with other reactionary attacks on US democracy, the suppression of minority voters' rights, and the Trumpist mob's Capitol raid in January 2021 (Frankenstein's monster does not wander around blindly: he knows precisely where he is stepping).

In reactionary discourse, CRT is ominously depicted as "anti-American," "dividing the nation," a strain of "cultural Marxism," "anti-white racism," "revisionist" and "shameful history" that, if left unchecked, will destroy the United States with its "divisiveness." The "inventor" of the controversy, Christopher Rufo (2021a; 2021b) called it a "new institutional orthodoxy" (a lie) in colleges and universities, ultimately associating it with things as disparate as Stalinism, Black nationalism, the Frankfurt School, and identitarianism. These descriptions make no pretense of accuracy: their intention, as Rufo himself admits (2021a), is to codify a series of negative images into a single term to scare the public and reassert control over the national historical imagination. Its dissemination by conservative media<sup>5</sup> turned the fight against CRT into a (monothematic) rightwing political and electoral war horse. Called upon to act, parents across the nation rose up against the teaching of CRT to their children, giving an important popular veneer to a controversy invented from the top down. The saturation of the media space with this *instrumental unreason*,<sup>6</sup> despite countless rebuttals, was fundamental to legitimizing the legislative attack against CRT and the 1619 Project — it literally manufactured the "maddening object" (Mbembe, 2017, p. 72) necessary to foster a "hallucinatory circle" without which contemporary desires for segregation and enmity would not exist or come to fruition.<sup>7</sup> In these delusions, as has been said before, schools and universities became "hotbeds of anti-Americanism" (The President's Advisory 1776 Commission, p. 20), dangerous places that needed to be shamelessly monitored. Disciplinary delegitimization thus goes hand in hand with de-democratizing zeal: if teachers and historians are part of the conspiracy, then they can no longer have the authority to define what is or is not valid knowledge about the national past. From this perspective, the legal ban on CRT and the 1619 Project presents itself as the *only* option capable of "saving" the nation from this conspiracy and,

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5 Rufo's first major national interview was with Trump's unofficial spokesman, Fox News host Tucker Carlson.

6 Julia Carrie Wong (2021), writing for The Guardian, has compiled some striking statements from people concerned about the "advance of CRT" in the US: one mother compared it to the tactics used by the Ku Klux Klan and Hitler to "dumb down" the population, while another accused it of being the "American version" of the Maoist Cultural Revolution. A third woman, in the same unreasonable vein, denounced her children's schools for teaching them to "murder police officers."

7 According to a survey conducted by the website Media Matters, in 2021 alone Fox News welcomed Rufo 52 times to its studios, in addition to having mentioned the term four thousand times throughout the year. These numbers give the exact dimensions of the moral panic created and fueled by the conservatives. See Geonzon & Davison (2021).



consequently, redefining the links between history and the polis. Let us then look at some of these laws.

In Virginia, where CRT was a central theme in the gubernatorial election in 2021, the first Executive Order (EO) of 2022 signed by Glen Youngkin, the Republican victor, banned in state schools the "teaching of divisive concepts" and "ideological indoctrination," such as CRT and the content of the 1619 Project, for the sake of the "future of our children." According to this EO, no one could be taught to believe that one "race" was "more oppressive" than another, much less that "inherently American characteristics" such as "meritocracy" and "hard work" are "racist" and "sexist" or that specific individuals should be held accountable for the past actions of people from their "racial group" (Virginia, 2022). To enforce the law, the EO instructed the school administrators to scrutinize the material to be taught and to permanently monitor the teachers, stipulating penalties for offenders. Ironically, this was done in the name of the "freedom" of the students, who cannot even opt for divergent views of national history. In a clear manifestation of institutional bad faith, the choice has already been made for them.

A similar tone is found in North Dakota's HB 1508/2021, currently in force, which effectively prevents the teaching of CRT and its variants in state institutions, precisely because, according to the legislators, racism would be an "individual behavior" and not something "systematically embedded in American society and its legal system" (North Dakota, 2021). Meanwhile in Oklahoma, HB 1775/2021, approved and signed by the governor, stipulated the immediate end of "diversity courses" in local public schools and universities, as well as, predictably, repeating the list of prohibitions found in other states: no one should be held responsible for events prior to their birth, "meritocracy" and "hard work" were free of any racist connotation, and students could not be "forced" to feel "guilt," "discomfort" and "distress" because of their "race" or "sex" (Oklahoma, 2021). Similarly, Arizona's legislation, which imposes heavy fines for those who fail to comply, repeats this language, emphasizing the interindividual aspect of "bias" and demands "objectivity" in the work of history teachers in the classroom (Arizona, 2021). In their fight against the "ideological indoctrination" represented by CRT, these laws advocated for "impartial teaching" based on "facts" and their "contexts," because this would prevent, we are forced to believe, the past from producing unjustified distress in individuals, now freed from any implications and responsibilities towards it — critical engagement replaced by passive contemplation. If we look at the other states, we see that these prohibitions are *universal* in the set of anti-CRT/1619 Project laws: their function seems to be precisely the preservation of "epistemic ignorance" regarding past violence in order to — returning to Mills (1997, pp. 49-71) — ensure that "white ignorance" (interested, cynical, nihilistic) is not disturbed by the specters that haunt it. Against the "illicit appearance" (Gordon,



2022, p. 137) of those who should remain invisible and silent, a “knowledge” is reaffirmed *in and through* bad faith.

In other states, legislators were not content with simply banning certain content; they also sought to legally prescribe the meaning of the national past. In Texas, two laws currently in force fulfill this role. The first, HB 2497/2021, created the 1836 Project, a “historical advisory” committee clearly inspired by the 1776 Commission, with the aim of promoting “patriotism” among Texans through a positive appreciation of their “Christian heritage” and their exceptional character within an already exceptional country: their history would be limited to “prosperity” and “democratic freedom,” with little or no attention to the local history of slavery, racial segregation (also imposed on the Hispanic population throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries) and, to use the words of Patricia Nelson Limerick (1987), the conflicted “legacy of conquest” that structured social relations in the Lone Star State and the American West (Texas, 2021a). While this committee’s function is to produce “auxiliary” educational material for tourists and public agencies, without censoring or supervisory power, the same is not true for HB 3979/2021, approved in June 2021 by the Texas Legislature. In this law, legislators prescribed a series of topics and items to be taught to students, ranging from the “history of Native Americans” to the fight for “women’s suffrage,” but emphasizing the need to avoid “contemporary issues” in favor of “facts” and nothing but the “facts” (Texas, 2021b). Any form of “political activism,” a term not even defined by the law, although indirectly associated with critical perspectives on the American past, is banned from classrooms, mainly so as not to, unsurprisingly, cause “distress” to students. Once again: there is method to the madness.

To leave no doubt about the intrinsic meaning of US history, and to frame “activist” interpretations, similar to Trump’s 1776 Report, HB 3979/2021 portrays slavery and racism in the following manner: “slavery and racism are deviations and betrayals of the authentic founding principles of the United States, which include liberty and equality” (Texas, 2021b). The reference to the “authentic founding principles” is an obvious allusion to the 1619 Project, whose adoption as teaching material was expressly forbidden in both states, framing in a way that admits no difference, that is, an a priori narrativization that determines *how* and *which* facts, figures, and processes will be represented (or not). In Gordon’s terms (1995, p. 17), the past becomes a “reified substance” to be passively contemplated and transmitted or worshipped as something immutable, inspiring, and therefore sacred.

It is no coincidence that one of the bills presented by Republicans in South Carolina (still not approved at the time of this article’s last revision) was called the “Act for the Restoration of the American Foundation,” in which the “ideals” of the American Revolution, echoing the





historical fundamentalism analyzed by Lepore (2011, pp. 70-97), are summarized as the "pursuit of liberty" and transformed into the perpetual motion of US history. Anything that contradicts this characterization is thus thrown out of the bounds of legitimate history and, consequently, of the narrative that structures the self-image of the community of like-minded individuals (South Carolina, 2021). The pinnacle of this reasoning can be found in the resolution presented by twelve Republicans in the US Congress, in which CRT is explicitly condemned as a "threat to the Republic, its citizens, [...], and the well-being and happiness of humanity" (United States, 2021) precisely because, in their view, it would undermine the "foundational principles" of the United States, threatening, if successful in its "revolutionary intent," the very "social fabric." In opposition to the "democratizing pact" of history, an exclusionary —and in this particular case, *anti-Black*— version of the past is restored, in which the positive normalization of the nation is accompanied by a surreptitious desire for separation and revenge, fundamental to the consolidation of the Trumpist society of enmity. Under this logic, CRT, falsified in its means and ends,<sup>8</sup> can only be understood as a threat and banned from the list of legitimate interpretations of the past.

With that, we return to Florida, where DeSantis's Republicans, backed by an extensive network of financial and media support, pledged "not to use taxpayers' money to teach children to hate their country" (Governor DeSantis Announces..., 2021). To this end, they not only replicated the type of CRT ban found in the rest of the country, but have also proposed readings of national history considered the only legitimate ones in the face of the "advance" of "far-left" ideas promoted by schoolteachers and university professors (the plot is already boring!). The statement from the Florida Secretary of Education, made shortly after the law banning CRT in Sunshine State classrooms, is unequivocal:

"our classrooms [...] are under constant threat from CRT advocates who are trying to manipulate classroom content into a means to impose their values on students, when schools should be empowering students with accurate historical knowledge." (Governor DeSantis Announces..., 2021).

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<sup>8</sup> In another bill introduced in South Carolina, CRT is defined thus: "(1) any race, sex, ethnicity, religion, color or national origin is inherently superior or inferior; (2) individuals should be treated adversely based on their sex, race, ethnicity, religion, color, or national origin; or (3) individuals, by virtue of their sex, race, ethnicity, religion, color or national origin are inherently responsible for the past actions of other members of the same sex, race, ethnicity, religion, color, or national origin" (South Carolina, 2022) For political and censorious purposes this is evidently a distortion of what CRT actually is.



In contrast to this “constant threat,” the aforementioned HB 7 subjects the teaching of history to the dictates of an “individual liberty” that, true to the neoliberalism that conditions it, turns into its *exact opposite*: a curtailing of the pluralism of ideas, hypostatizing the “individual” in relation to their socio-historical contexts and imposing a historical “objectivity” that is intended to be unquestionable. In this sense, HB 7 portrays the history of the United States with an unequivocal meaning: “American history should be seen as factual, not constructed, it should be seen as knowable, teachable and testable, and it should be defined as the creation of a new nation based largely on the universal principles of the Declaration of Independence” (Florida, 2022). With this reductionist spirit, supposedly “factual” and objective, the “history of African-Americans” (the term used in the law), is understood as the mere overcoming of obstacles against “individual liberty,” its role is to positively “inspire” students with the “contributions” of these subjects to the “American experiment.”

By this logic, the history of the United States is a “mythical march to freedom” in which slavery, according to Johnson (2007, p. 43), is depicted as a path to “salvation” and the brutal post-Emancipation racial regime is considered a mere “deviation” from the normative temporality of the nation. The enslavement of millions, the terror of Jim Crow, continued racism and persist economic inequality are, as if by magic, transformed into barriers to “personal growth” and nothing more: history itself loses the ability to convincingly explain both the past and the present — precisely what Trouillot (1995, pp. 150-151) called an “inauthentic representation” because it (purposefully) *prevents* critical engagement with the past. Taken together, then, the anti-CRT/1619 Project legislation, part of a larger agreement on the “misinterpretation of the world” (Mills, 1997, p. 18), functional to reactionary positions, produces a perceptible denial through silencing that, in practice, trivializes the nation’s historical wounds precisely to justify the status quo and invalidate demands for representation and reparations — a kind of history that is not only actively anti-reparations, but also reproduces the kind of violence that led to the demand for reparations because it “undermines the conditions for addressing them” (Gordon, 2022, p. 13).

Despite its immediate electoral instrumentalization, the ultimate goal of this imposition seems to be a re-disciplining of history, that is, a redefinition of its links with the polis and, from there, of what can be said and represented legitimately about the past. This legitimacy, however, is due less to the methodological or empirical issues that usually intervened in the secular disciplining of history and that, according to Hayden White (1987, pp. 58-59), repressed its appeals to manifest political authority, than it is due to openly political criteria: the intimidation campaigns against teachers, the conspiracy theories involving “indoctrination” in educational institutions, and the adjective “ideological” thrown at the discipline of historiography are all fundamental weapons in



this endeavor, as they assist in the spurious but efficient opposition between "adequate histories" and the "ideological" ones uncommitted to "truth." For this reason, I believe the contention around CRT and the 1619 Project has become not only a bitter clash between divergent meanings of the past, as were the previous history wars, but a battle for the *ultimate meaning* of history for American society, to be resolved not by accepting the most truthful representation or by enlightened debate, as a certain scientific naivety believes, but by shameless recourse to political authority. Unable to win the dispute with the power of words, the Republicans seek to end it with the words of power. If, as Chakrabarty argued (1998), hegemonic history is a temporality supported by superior military capability, it can also be a false representation supported by superior political power. This means that, at the end of the day, the winner is not the one most committed to "historical truth," but the one who defines it in advance — even if it is nothing more than bad faith disguised as "objectivity."

### The De-Democratized Past

Finally, let us return to the implications of the US situation for the broader problem of what I have called here the de-democratization of the past. In the United States, it operates on a number of basic levels. The first is the assertion that history should serve exclusively to reproduce an unreflective devotion to the nation, restrictively imagined as one of its — to use an Althusserian inflection — unquestionable ideological apparatuses. De-democratization equates here to the exclusion, by the act of legal force discussed above, of representations and interpretations that fall outside this function, condemned as "seditious" and "anti-patriotic." The patriotic historical education desired by conservatives amounts to a de-democratized historical education, as it curtails a "robust cultivation of society" and the "shared destiny" that, for Brown (2018, p. 44) and Wolin (2017, pp. 101-103), is imperative to truly democratic life. Deprived of the dissent that prevents the authoritarian fixing of our narratives, citizens, to return to the seminal considerations of Paul Ricoeur (2007), cannot even choose which pasts they want to live in their present because that choice has already been made for them. The result here is that forced pride typical of tyrannical unanimities and regressive nationalism: *America is great again!* In the familiar narrative of the imagined community, the very notion of humanity is "exclusive" (Gilroy, 2007, p. 118) and history, if used and mobilized in and by these reactionary versions, is a unique weapon to define and sustain this exclusivity. In my understanding, this marks the passage from a politics of antagonism, which is integral to democracy, as Chantal Mouffe points out (2015), to one of enmity, which is its opposite. This de-democratization, in sum, "destroys the practices and lexicons of democratic freedom" (Brown, 2018, p. 46), giving free rein to the *licentiousness* of the dominant



groups, who, imagining themselves permanently innocent, can act as they see fit (Gordon, 2022, pp. 104-112).

Moreover, this negation through silencing inevitably produces an *omitted representation* (Anderson, 1992), that is, a deliberate ellipsis which, despite not strictly lying about the empirical data, produces a falsification of the past because it strips it of its representational authenticity. Evidently, this serves both the nostalgic fantasy of an Edenic white past and the continuance of the image of a perpetually innocent America: the omitted representation sanitizes the past of its horrors, exorcises its ghosts, and conceals its legacies in the present. Phenomena that do not fit into this idealization are outside of history, regardless of having occurred, and the subjects who suffered are dehumanized and relegated to a second social death. In the words of one of the leaders of the anti-CRT/1619 Project revolt in Florida, Tina Descovich, children did not “need to know how slaves were treated,” because this could provoke “unnecessary discomfort” in the young (Bouie, 2022): a cynical excuse for denialism, but one that sums up well the bad faith and eagerness to *erase that Other* who disturbs the positive stability and community of peers — the anti-Black racism, in this specific case, is the cement for this positivity. The target is not “Critical Race Theory” or the 1619 Project *per se*, but the existence of these Others. In this case, returning to Fredric Jameson (1992 p. 72), an imaginary solution is first “invented” for insoluble social tensions: unable to physically extinguish this uncomfortable presence, one appeals to a narcissistic past where this Other is eliminated through omitted representation. Fantasies of purification and plenitude replace the effective recognition of national historical wounds and, through this, block the *collective* liberation of subjects from the “tyrannical power” of history: “people who imagine that history flatters them (as it does, indeed, since they wrote it) are impaled on their history like a butterfly on a pin and become incapable of seeing or changing themselves, or the world” (Baldwin, 2018, p. 43).

A third implication of this offensive is the weakening of the very ideas of public education and shared history, in favor of strengthening the “protected personal sphere” of the family. According to these legal texts, the family has the *duty* and *right* to definitively oversee and decide what their children are taught, protecting them from “indoctrination” and “subversion” (the similarity with the language circulating in Brazil is not coincidental ...). Notoriously neoliberal institutions such as the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) took advantage of the anti-CRT moral panic to propose the dismantling of public education institutions, accused of being “indoctrinators,” while concomitantly advocating for the “return” of educational activity to parents, the only ones with “moral authority” to teach them (Eden, 2021; Eden & Yenor, 2022).<sup>9</sup> The public is then colonized by the private

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<sup>9</sup> In an interview with the NYT, Rufo categorically affirmed that “public schools” had declared war against the United



and "family values" are elevated to the status of determinants of what can or cannot be brought into the classroom — a privatization of education that prevents a common past, considered by many parents "offensive" and "uncomfortable," from becoming, in the words of Mbembe (2017), a shared history. Furthermore, by focusing on the supposed "ideological perversions" of public education institutions, portrayed as the source of all moral and social ills, this reactionary raid encourages their dismantling, already accelerated by economic suffocation and the erosion of their autonomy by academic neoliberalism.

The case of Florida is, once again, paradigmatic in that the anti-CRT/1619 Project legislation is accompanied by sharp cuts in public education funding and the literal privatization, via vouchers and home schooling, also supported by the demonization of teachers and certain fields as "ant-American" and "indoctrinating" — which Scott (2019) points out is not very different from what happens in other parts of the United States, where schools and universities are increasingly subject to censorship, control, and the curtailment of academic freedom. It can be said, therefore, that this assault is not foreign to the advance of neoliberal rationality, but rather integral to it, as it fulfills the function of loudly proclaiming what well-mannered neoliberalism only whispers. The public delegitimization of entire fields, in particular those related to the Humanities, is a far-reaching strategy, the goal of which, let us not deceive ourselves, is to erode and ultimately destroy disciplinary autonomies to replace them with docile counterparts or, if that is not possible, to eliminate them altogether. In this manner, the representation of the Humanities as "hotbeds of anti-Americanism" complements the accusations made by DeSantis's predecessor in office (and other Republican politicians throughout the United States), that they are "expensive" and "useless" (at least when minimally critical or democratizing) (Scott, 2018).

Finally, the de-democratization of the past also implies encoding histories in which the *society does not exist*. All that remains is, on the one hand, the nation, the object of uncritical love and, on the other, "individuals and families guided by morality and the market" (Brown, 2019, p. 40), de-historicized and atomized. A strong indication of this occlusion is the focus, found in all the laws passed, on the individual as a self-contained unit without substantial historical embedding except that of belonging to an innocent nation. In Tennessee, for example, teaching that there are "power relations and struggles" between specific groups was prohibited with severe penalties for teachers (Tennessee, 2021). According to the letter of the law, this means the rejection of substantive ideas of society and/or historical process. And in Iowa and Alabama,

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States and that, for this reason, they should be completely dismantled. This would be for him the new phase of the conservative fight in his country, based on the Republican strategy against CRT. This opinion is shared by Fox News, which advocates daily for the end of the public education system. See Gertz (2022) and Goldberg (2021).



the prohibition of “stereotyping” “entire groups” in order to avoid feelings of “guilt” and “distress” regarding past events is equivalent, despite the ostensibly technical language, to the same operation of suppressing substantive historical contextualization (Alabama, 2021; Iowa, 2021). If the social does not exist, or is merely a “fabrication” of ideologically “perverse” teachers, then, as Gordon astutely observes (2020), its non-relationality is imposed, that is, the very ideas of relationship and commonality are abolished, which, despite their limitations, are foundational for the constitution of real responsibilities towards the situations we inherit and those we wish to build in the future. The “rejection of the social world,” so writes the philosopher, is a “form of bad faith” that leads to the “dissolution of contact with Others” (Gordon, 1995, pp. 180-184): wouldn’t this be the portrait of the narcissistic, fetishistic and nihilistic universe produced by the neoliberal advance and reiterated by the anti-CRT moral panic?

From this perspective, past and present inequalities are imagined as more or less fair consequences of competition among atomized individuals, devoid of real facticity and equally positioned vis-à-vis the “market,” as Brown notes (2018, p. 45). The public admission and honest analysis of past inequities, which is also the stuff from which good stories are made, is, in the eyes of conservatives, “divisiveness,” “victimization,” or, on the other hand, manifestations of “anti-white hatred”— to use Tucker Carlson’s symptomatic expression, a Fox News presenter and staunch opponent of CRT— although, in one of his daily vituperations against America’s enemies, he admitted to having no idea what it “means” (Gertz, 2021). There is no possibility of recognition or reparation from this perspective, precisely because “if there is no such thing as society, but only individuals and families guided by markets and morals, then there is no social power that engenders hierarchies, exclusion, and violence” (Brown, 2019, p. 40) — there is no *history*, so to speak, only disembodied “values,” decontextualized “heroes” *in extremis*, empty “universal principles,” and a nation frozen in time. The representation of the past becomes a free-for-all much worse than any “postmodern relativism” — the usual bogeyman of historiography — could have ever been.

Ultimately, this ruse permits a kind of inversion of domination, in which the dominant groups are represented as the “real” victims of the fierce, “racist” Others, dedicated in the end to their elimination — an instrument, as Mbembe (2019) and Gordon (2022, p. 64) have rightly noted, essential to fueling the resentment and desire for revenge that underpin contemporary societies of enmity. When manipulated this way, history becomes a tool for the “serial reproduction” of little Trumps, at first call ready to defend the “white firm” from its dark-skinned usurpers (Scott, 2018). Such “scarecrow fabrication” (Mbembe, 2017, p. 84) is crucial to ensuring that the figures of the “people” that sustain societies of enmity are, on the one hand, increasingly limited and, on the



other, reactive and extremely violent: the enemy must be annihilated before it annihilates them. The link Carlson made between the advance of "identity politics" in the United States and the 1994 Rwandan genocide (Gertz, 2021) is, despite being absurd, the culmination of this thinking: by linking two moments that do not have even the slightest similarity, Carlson, however, offers a rationalization as "fantastic as it is pathological" (Baldwin, 2012, p. 176) for all sorts of restrictions, persecutions and exclusions of these threatening and frightening Others from the community of peers. Meanwhile, there is that call to "white terror" that, according to Mills (1997, p. 86), is the decisive resource for maintaining the "moral and political universe" designated by the racial contract and reinforced by constant ideological conditioning. The reorganization of the national past effected by the anti-CRT/1619 Project laws thus points to the willingness of Republican politicians to diligently fulfill their roles as guardians of this order.

### (In)Conclusion

The case of contemporary history wars in the United States ultimately points to a problem that I believe is unavoidable for academic historiography today: not only the crisis of its conditions of production, reproduction and public legitimacy, but also, if we consider the global reactionary advance, a crisis of its democratizing pact, carried out principally under the aegis of an expansion of liberal democracy, with its sometimes brutal ups and downs. This brings us to a paradoxical situation: that of being forced to defend institutions with which we have profound disagreements. It is important, therefore, to define the terms of this defense, so as not to fall back upon political and disciplinary idealizations and fetishizations, barriers to more radical imaginations. At the other extreme, it is also important not to believe in the total reinvention of the world from scratch — such a *tabula rasa* does not exist. The reality is that today there are no longer any guarantees (which we perhaps naively believed to be almost eternal) for the future existence of both the discipline and democracy, even in their most limited liberal-representative forms. The ground beneath our feet has shifted, perhaps beyond our worst expectations: Frankenstein's monster is causing earthquakes in its wake.

This offensive must therefore be taken seriously as it points to a possible reactionary-neoliberal redisciplining of history, of which the United States provides just one, albeit quite extreme, example. Over the last decade in Brazil, even before Bolsonaro's rise to power, the *Escola sem Partido* (the "Nonpartisan Schools" movement) undertook a similar campaign of public de-legitimation of the discipline and private companies found unprecedented commercial rewards for historical denialism, a kind of commodification of bad faith at levels surprising even for our country. The lessons echoing from the North therefore cannot be ignored. The mobilization



of history to form a society of enmity; the rupture of the democratizing pact; the successful propagation of unprecedented forms of historical denial (transcending mere empirical lies); the dissolution of the social (and of robust ideas of society); rampant political de-democratization; the defamation of history teachers; the destruction of public education; and the inhumanization of entire communities (thrown out of history and the Law): everything we see in the United States is also happening in Brazil. To pretend that all this will pass and we will recover the lost disciplinary and political “normality” is to turn from the world towards a futile chimera: the urgency of the moment should not allow us to do this. Thus, we inevitably return to that famous modern question: after all, what is to be done? And, I would add, at what cost? That is the dimension of our dilemma.

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