

# Irrelevant Scapegoat: The Perils of Doing European History in Post-Trump America<sup>1</sup>

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On 8 February 2022, an expert in Middle Eastern legal history — Florida State University associate professor Will Hanley — testified in front of Florida’s House Education and Employment Committee. As a volunteer commentator rather than an invited speaker, Hanley was allotted just sixty seconds. But in his brief time, he did everything he could to argue against the adoption of the HB 7 “stop WOKE act,” which called for new educational protocols, especially regarding how race can be taught in U.S. classrooms<sup>2</sup> Hanley is not an Americanist; he does not teach on the subjects the HB 7 law affects, such as the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. constitution, or the Federalist Papers. Nonetheless, this specialist on Islamic naming practices and Ottoman-Egyptian nationalisms stepped up and risked his career at a publicly funded institution because he knew that the reach of the U.S. culture

<sup>1</sup> This article first appeared in *Contemporary European History* 32 (2023): 27-32. © The author. Published by Cambridge University Press. Reprinted by permission.

<sup>2</sup> Volunteer testimonies in response to HB 7 can be heard at <https://www.myfloridahouse.gov/VideoPlayer.aspx?eventID=7878> starting at 1:31:30. Hanley’s statement is at 1:33:50. He focused on the bill’s requirement

that only “factual,” uncontested American history be taught in schools. His statement

was published in local newspapers throughout Florida. For example, see:

Ana Ceballos, “Bill Targeting Discomfort or Guilt in School, Work Discussions

Ready for House Floor,” *Miami Herald*, 8 Feb. 2022.

Bulletin of the German Historical Institute 71 (Spring 2023): 65-74  
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3 Hanley's decision to speak out while working for a Florida public institution could have led (and still can) to severe encroachments on his professional career, not just in terms of pay rises, teaching schedule and administrative responsibilities. The Florida state system does not guarantee sabbaticals, and those few sabbaticals awarded are determined by extra-departmental committees and the upper administration, which is ever more dependent on the governor's pleasure. Tenure is also no longer secure, as post-tenure review laws have just been passed in Florida, as I discuss later.

wars is much greater than American history, affecting all historians and all the students they teach – in the United States and beyond.<sup>3</sup> In this essay, I want to explain why Hanley's actions should serve as a model for us all. To do this, I focus on how the U.S. culture wars – as waged by both the right and the left – are triggering a global reconceptualization of European history that will have dangerous consequences for students, researchers, teachers, and the profession at large. I start with Florida – the state where both Hanley and I work – because it is an extreme case of how the new culture wars have taken aim at history education, a template unfortunately being replicated with similar interventions in other U.S. states.

Before tackling the issues that brought Hanley into the courtroom, it is important to point out that, over the past three decades, the United States has been the site of positive, progressive transformation in history generally and European history specifically. Slowly but surely, the profession has responded to longstanding calls to decolonize the curriculum, diversify faculty and push for greater inclusion among student bodies. What is offered, who is offering it, and whom they are offering it to have shifted. The changes are evident in the difference between what I was taught and what most young Americans now are being taught (at least until today). Even though I was a baby-boomer's baby, from elementary school to college, I rarely learned about the longstanding racial and environmental violence my world had produced. Instead, my schooling worked to instill in me the worldview of the acquisitive settlers of American colonialism, not those who already lived here or were brought here involuntarily. I was dressed up as a pilgrim for school plays at Thanksgiving; I made maladroit dioramas of California Missions for history class; and I went on field trips to the Sacramento Valley so that I could pan for gold like the "good old '49ers." I learned almost nothing about anything anywhere after 1945. The textbooks on European history assigned to me had a lot about Napoleon, Gladstone, Bismarck, Hitler and Stalin, but no mention was made of nineteenth-

century colonialism, gender, migration, post-colonialism or environmental destruction. The professors were different, too. Looking up at the podium, rarely did I see anyone who was not male, not white and not heteronormative. I learned about a non-white, queer, non-Western centric world by living in the world, not from what my institutions presented to me.

<sup>4</sup> Taken from a 2021 job ad for a position in Nineteenth-Century European History at Illinois State University. [https://www.h-net.org/jobs/job\\_display.php?id=61762](https://www.h-net.org/jobs/job_display.php?id=61762).

None of this is the case for my students today. In just thirty years, the difference in American students' experience is staggering. The students I teach learned about the civil rights movement in elementary school. Textbooks on European history today have entire chapters focused on the systems of violence perpetrated throughout Asia, Africa and the Americas in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, immigration policies within Europe, gender revolutions and environmentalism. The ideals of campus communities also bear little resemblance to what I was offered. Most university catalogues sent to potential freshmen are filled with idyllic photographs of faculty and students that include every possible ethnicity, skin color, religion and gender. Though in reality faculty continue to be disproportionately male and white, the push for change here is nail-bitingly intense and largely welcomed. Many higher educational institutions require applicants to supply a diversity statement alongside their CVs, cover letters and transcripts, stating explicitly that those "who can contribute to the climate of inclusivity on campus are especially welcome to apply."<sup>4</sup> And faculty everywhere are wrangling with their deans to broaden the category of "diversity" ever further so that institutional culture is not just more inclusive on paper but also in lived terms.

None of these transformations happened by themselves. They were the result of a previous culture war led by activists, scholars and politicians who wanted American higher educational institutions to embody and support a more complex vision of democracy and progress.

However, faith that this process would last came to an abrupt halt in 2016. The election of Donald Trump and the expanding

**5** For the full HB 7 bill, see: <https://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2022/7/BillText/er/PDF>.

**6** For the full HB 1557 bill, see: <https://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2022/1557/BillText/er/PDF>.

campaigns to re-elect the ultra-right to state legislatures, school boards and federal offices reversed the gains of the 2000s and 2010s. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Florida, which has taken center-stage in national conversations about education's role in inculcating a sense of pride, positivity and belief in American exceptionalism. Since early 2022, in a bid for the presidential run in 2024, Republican Governor Ron DeSantis has used education policy as a vehicle for white, heteronormative, capitalist and nationalist cultural policies that he claims are the best cures for America's ills. This campaign is not just bombast: it features a carefully crafted collection of legislative initiatives that are designed to control how history is taught, conceived and professionalized.

Between March and May 2022 alone, the Florida legislature passed five pieces of legislation affecting the teaching of history from elementary school to college. The aforementioned HB 7 "stop WOKE act" prohibits any teaching that could make students feel they bear personal responsibility for historic wrongs, clarifies that color-blindness is "not racist," emphasizes that no individual's status is either privileged or oppressed because of "his or her race, color, sex, or national origin," and demands that American history

shall be viewed as factual, not as constructed, shall be viewed as knowable, teachable, and testable, and shall be defined as the creation of a new nation based largely on the universal principles stated in the Declaration of Independence.<sup>5</sup>

The HB 1557 "Don't Say Gay" bill bans public elementary schoolteachers from holding classroom instruction about sexual orientation or gender identity, with the provision that teachers at higher grade levels can also face restrictions if course materials are not considered "developmentally appropriate."<sup>6</sup> The HB 395 "Victims of Communism Day" law designates class time to focus on the atrocities perpetrated by communist regimes and creates an annual day of remembrance to "honor the 100 million people who have fallen victim

to communist regimes across the world.”<sup>7</sup> The HB 1467 “Curriculum Transparency” bill codifies parents’ right to object to any course materials to which they feel their children should not be exposed.<sup>8</sup> The Florida State Board of Education is re-evaluating textbooks and has already banned forty-five nationally certified textbooks because of their supposed focus on “critical race theory” and over-emphasis on “social-emotional” learning.<sup>9</sup> Finally, the SB 7044 “Postsecondary Education” bill requires teachers working in Florida’s public institutions – regardless of their tenure status – to face review and possible termination every five years as a way to ensure that educational institutions are “more in line with what the state’s priorities are.”<sup>10</sup> Teachers in primary, secondary and post-secondary schools can now be sued if “caught” by parents or students breaking any of these laws, all of which will be in effect for the 2022-3 school year. No-one can doubt the purpose of this legislative onslaught. As DeSantis put it: “we are not going to use your tax dollars to teach our kids to hate this country or to hate each other.”<sup>11</sup> For DeSantis and his allies, the job of education is to erase any potentially troubling historical narratives about American legacies of violence, hate and prejudice so (white) Americans can live in pride, in peace and continue voting conservatively.

For historians of Europe, the question is: why does all of this matter to us? Unfortunately, the answer is clear. Directly and indirectly, both from the left and the right, the overlapping U.S. culture wars are shaping how European history is taught and professionalized. This has an impact, not just on job opportunities but also on the kinds of books published and the next generations’ views of what Europe represents.

Let us begin on the left. For scholars committed to combating the relentless onslaught of conservative educational policies in states like Florida, the history of Europe is a key battleground because it is considered the haven of Western-centrism, white-Christian dominated politics, and filled with triumphalist tales of capital, imperialism and cultural elitism.

**7** For the full HB 395 bill, see: <https://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2022/395/BillText/er/PDF>.

**8** For the full HB 1467 bill, see: <https://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2022/1467/BillText/er/PDF>.

**9** For more on the textbook bans, see Dana Goldstein and Stephanie Saul, “A Look Inside the Textbooks That Florida Rejected,” *New York Times*, 7 May 2022. For more on how Florida’s attack on “critical race theory” signals a nation-wide movement, see: Wyatt Msykow, “Legislation to Limit Critical Race Theory at Colleges Has Reached Fever Pitch,” *The Chronicle for Higher Education*, 8 June 2022.

**10** For the full SB 7044 bill, see: <https://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2022/7044/BillText/er/PDF>. For DeSantis’s quote from the bill signing, see: Colleen Flaherty, “Florida Passes Posttenure-Review Law,” *Inside Higher Ed*, 20 Apr. 2022.

**11** Renzo Downey, “Gov. DeSantis Signs ‘Stop W.O.K.E. Act’ as Legal Challenge Looms,” *Florida Politics*, 23 Apr. 2022.

**12** Dylan Ruediger, "The 2021 AHA Jobs Report: 2019-2020 Data Show Relative Stability in the Year before COVID," *Perspectives on History*, 20 Jan. 2021.

**13** Andrew Denning, "Modern European History in Its Institutional Contexts: How We Got Here and What Comes Next," *Central European History*, 54 (2021): 682-6.

To engineer a more inclusive, globally sensitive curriculum, many history departments are choosing to oust Europe from their strategic plans. No one teaching in the United States today was surprised to read in the American Historical Association Jobs Report that "hiring for European history positions continued its long-term decline," with 2020 showing half as many job offerings than five years before (from 15 per cent of all jobs offered in 2015 to the dismal 7 per cent of 2020).<sup>12</sup> In 2020-1, the downward trend continued, with only three tenure-stream jobs in any aspect of modern European history announced in the United States. This sharp decrease in new positions is happening at the same time as a generation of Europeanists are retiring. In short, the dip in offerings represents a bigger shift than any one side of this equation shows: departments across the country – in big public institutions and smaller private institutions alike – have decided that Europe should be on the out. Sometimes these positions have been repurposed to bolster other, neglected fields, but usually the choice is more a response to administrative pressure for shrinkage, with the ever-less-prized Europeanist lamb slotted for slaughter.

For those who support a progressive agenda, this phenomenon seems just. After all, as Andrew Denning recently noted, European history dominated American academia during the Cold War, monopolizing positions, curricula and funding opportunities while the rest of the world (the United States aside) was ignored.<sup>13</sup> It makes sense that scholars have responded to the flattened, racially determined Western Civ models of the McCarthy-era past and the Trump-era present by pushing to displace Europe. To correct both the academic past and the political present, faculty are increasingly treating European history as the irrelevant "dead, white guy" – the former golden boy who has overstayed his welcome. While I sympathize with this impulse, I cannot help but wonder what the history of two of the most studied topics in departments – colonialism and capitalism – becomes without Europeanists. Might this accidentally lead to the perception that capitalism,

imperialism, colonialism and the violence that underpinned them were somehow natural? Do we not lose the potential for greater understanding of the historically specific causes and consequences of colonialism by leaving aside the domestic crises that made Europeans accept and even yearn to subjugate in ways no one had imagined before? These are challenging questions for scholars – including me – who want to move beyond a Europe-centered history curriculum. In so many ways, this is the crux of the problem: studying Europe is often equated with Eurocentrism. And though those are not the same thing, they are often treated as if they were, leading to an uncritical purge of Europe in an effort to correct past mistakes of its predominance.

14 HB 7 bill, <https://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2022/7/BillText/er/PDF>, 13-14.

The right, meanwhile, also has its eyes on Europe, but in a completely opposite way. Instead of cutting Europe out, the right is pushing to give Europe a bigger (though more tightly defined) place in a revamped narrative of proud American exceptionalism. A clear example of this can be found in the “stop WOKE act” mentioned above. After two pages delineating how U.S. history should be taught “factually,” the bill focuses on how schools should teach the Holocaust, which it describes as

a watershed event in the history of humanity, to be taught in a manner that leads to an investigation of human behavior, an understanding of the ramifications of prejudice, racism, and stereotyping, and an examination of what it means to be a responsible and respectful person, for the purposes of encouraging tolerance of diversity in a pluralistic society and for nurturing and protecting democratic values and institutions.<sup>14</sup>

In essence, the right hopes to use European history to cover the issues of democracy, authoritarianism, racism, xenophobia, colonialism and sexism that they want to leave undiscussed in the context of the American past (and present). Clearing out America’s complex relationship with these darker aspects of history, while focusing on ways they played out in Europe,

makes European history the perfect container for American absolutism. America is exceptional once again, and Europe provides the perfect counterpoint for civics lessons about the dangers of prejudice. In a similar vein, the “Victims of Communism Day” curriculum also serves as a way to whitewash American history, filled as it is with heart-warming stories about the Berlin Airlift and the Marshall Plan. Here, it is past American actions “saving Europe” from Russia and communism that are used to deflect increased criticism about America’s present-day diplomatic and economic interventions beyond its shores.

This partisan struggle to control European history in the United States has – and will continue to have – important effects, ranging from the inner makeup of academia to the vision of Europe presented to the next generation. In part, this is because the American job market is at least 60 percent larger than that in Europe. And, for better or worse, the dominance of English within international circles means that new historiography often emerges from Anglo-American institutions. Casting Europe aside or turning it into a moral fall guy will affect not just Americans’ careers and their knowledge about Europe; it will also influence Europeans applying for fellowships and jobs. It will determine which books get published, and which ones get read.

Highly problematic in all of this is that the articles, books and pedagogies that will likely rise to the top of the pile will substantiate precisely what legislations like the “stop WOKE act” prescribe: namely, that Europe is a continent of rich, greedy, white Christian folks with planetary ambitions and a penchant for genocide. Already we are getting global histories that respond to both the left and the right of the U.S. culture wars in this way, histories that limit Europeans’ roles to international statesmen, bureaucrats, lawyers, bankers, engineers and rogue adventurers voraciously trying to devour every community with which they come into contact. To a certain degree these histories are true and important. But they are also deeply wrong: Europe was filled with more poor, powerless, provincial



people than rich, potent, cosmopolitans. Europe was not all white, was not all Christian, was always multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious, and tied for centuries within migratory patterns (forced and unforced) linking it with the worlds surrounding it. Yes, Europeans have perpetrated some of the most dehumanizing systems of violence and extraction imaginable. But these systems were not the product of an original sin. They were the result of complicated worlds of inequality and desperation as much as of scientific progress and avarice.

The American culture wars have not been a complete loss for European history, however. Some American-based historians have responded to their hostile political climate by rethinking Europe instead of ousting it or moralizing it. Here are just a few examples: Pamela Ballinger, Nimisha Barton, and Lauren Stokes have taken trigger points of America's culture wars to open up new questions about Europe's own migration histories centered on gender, religion, refugees and race.<sup>15</sup> Tiffany Florvil, Robin Mitchell, and Silvana Patriarca have confronted Europe's "whiteness," showing not just the deep racist discourses that made "white Europe," but also showcasing the covered-up histories of the Europeans of color those discourses tried to erase.<sup>16</sup> Emily Greble, Sarah Abrevaya Stein and Judith Surkis have resituated Muslim and Jewish communities from "(post)Ottoman Europe" and "colonial Europe" into the center of our imaginary of European citizens, reminding us how much "Christian Europe" was (and is?) a crusade, never a universal truth.<sup>17</sup> And Anita Kurimay has reminded us that no matter how much a country wants us to "never say gay," the lived experience of LGBTQ Europeans can and should be excavated, unless we want to continue living in convenient, homophobic myths.<sup>18</sup> These are just some of the American-based historians who have lived their culture wars

**18** Anita Kurimay, *Queer Budapest: 1873-1961* (Chicago, 2020).

**15** Pamela Ballinger, *The World Refugees Made: Decolonization and the Foundation of Postwar Italy* (Ithaca, NY, 2020). Nimisha Barton, *Reproductive Citizens: Gender, Immigration, and the State in Modern France, 1880-1945* (Ithaca, NY, 2020). Lauren Stokes, *Fear of the Family: Guest Workers and Family Migration in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Ithaca, NY, 2021).

**16** Tiffany Florvil, *Mobilizing Black Germany: Afro-German Women and the Making of a Transnational Movement* (Champaign, IL, 2020). Robin Mitchell, *Venus Noire: Black Women and Colonial Fantasies in Nineteenth-Century France* (Athens, GA, 2020). Silvana Patriarca, *Race in Post-Fascist Italy: 'War Children' and the Color of the Nation* (Cambridge, 2022).

**17** Emily Greble, *Muslims and the Making of Modern Europe* (Oxford, 2021). Sarah Abrevaya Stein, *Extraterritorial Dreams: European Citizenship, Sephardi Jews, and the Ottoman Twentieth Century* (Chicago, 2016). Judith Surkis, *Sex, Law, and Sovereignty in French Algeria, 1830-1930* (Ithaca, NY, 2019).

**19** Gabrielle Cornish, "When Ukrainian Music Wasn't Under Threat, It Thrived," *New York Times*, 13 May 2022.

and responded by problematizing Europe, instead of treating it as irrelevant or as a scapegoat. Thanks to them, we see not just a more multi-faceted world; we also see how dangerous it is to believe Europe was either singular or simple.

Unfortunately, the space for writing and research of this kind requires structures that I fear will be less available if my home country continues to fund, defund, attack, silence and decenter Europe as a side-effect of intense ideological partisanship. If we want to preserve the complexity and diversity of our field, we will have to emulate the courage of Will Hanley. We will have to recognize that the culture wars raging inside and outside our institutions affect us all, even if what is under attack is outside our direct areas of expertise. Only that way can we continue to write and teach histories that challenge rather than placate. Inevitably, there will be those who argue that history and politics should remain separate. But this seems hopelessly misguided in the current climate. It is surely time to stop reacting and start acting. If your first instinct is to disagree, I offer you a quote from a recent *New York Times* article by another Florida colleague of mine, Gabrielle Cornish, where she cites the Ukrainian music critic Liuba Morozova's wise words: "the idea that 'culture is beyond politics' has long been promoted by those who put culture at the service of ideology and war crimes."<sup>19</sup> Let us not fool ourselves. The writing and teaching of history is and always has been constrained and shaped by the political. The only way out is to jump in.

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