# The Struggles Over History in the United States

Paul Tiyambe Zeleza
Senior Advisor for Strategic Initiatives
Office of the President
Professor of African Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
Howard University
2400 Sixth Street, NW
Washington, DC 20059

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In American colleges and universities history as an academic discipline, much like the other humanities, finds itself in an unrelenting spiral of declining enrollment and at the crosshairs of ferocious "culture wars" ravaging American education and public discourse. Thus, history is caught between intersected forces emanating from within and outside the academy. In this presentation I seek to analyze these forces and suggest ways to recuperate, reform, and restructure history as an intellectual enterprise, which is imperative for the discipline itself and its practitioners.

More crucially, history is essential for the protection, promotion, and projection of democratic values and sustainable development in a world haunted by the specter of six interlocked crises discussed in my 2021 book, *Africa and the Disruptions of the Twenty-First Century*: the globalization of tribalism; worldwide democratic recessions and resistance; rising economic disequilibrium and inequalities; shifting global hierarchies and hegemonies; the emergence of digital technologies and surveillance capitalism; and what I call the rebellion of nature—climate change on steroids.

**Where Have the History Students Gone?**

Student enrollment in history has fluctuated over the last few decades, but overall it has been on a downward trend. In 2016, the American Historical Association began undertaking surveys to track history enrollment trends. According to an article by Julia Brookins published in AHA's magazine, *Perspectives on History*, in March 2016, a survey of degrees awarded in history in 2014 showed that the number "fell for the third time in four years, this time by 9.1 percent from the previous year, from 34,360 to 31,233.1 This is the largest year-to-year change for undergraduate history degrees since a 9.8 percent increase in 1992… The aggregate number of

bachelor's-level majors reported in the 2014–15 [AHA] *Directory* is 19 percent lower than in the 2009–10 listings."

Another report by Brookins in September 2016 stated, "Academic institutions in the survey reported that, in aggregate, undergraduate enrollment in all history courses in 2014–15 was 7.6 percent lower than it had been in 2012–13." Recently, according to survey results published in April 2024, "the number of student enrollments reported in 2022–23 was 4.4 percent lower than those for 2019–20." The survey reveals that "This trend is occurring alongside a longer-term decline in undergraduate history degree completions, which the Department of Education reports fell another 6.43 percent in 2022, the most recent year for which data is available."

Some respondents to the AHA survey published in May 2016 blamed the Great Recession that led to declining prospects for careers associated with history, such as the legal profession. Others said "moving away from research and teaching centered on Europe and the United States has undercut students' interest in studying history." Blaming the challenges facing history on the expansion of the geographical horizons beyond Euroamerica is popular among rightwing ideologues. Others blame specialization. David Kaiser, who examined several Ivies and prestigious liberal arts colleges found that "In all those institutions, the number of history faculty increased, while the total number of students they taught fell. I believe that the main reason for the decline in history is that students don't care for the product the faculty is offering. Most history courses are now too specialized and often politically slanted to interest them." However, according to AHA's survey mentioned above, evidence shows that "departments with diverse specializations 'were more likely to have increased their share of bachelor's degrees' than those without them."

In this presentation, I examine three key institutional factors that account for declining history enrollments in American higher education: the composition and content of the discipline, the triumph and disincentives of neoliberalism, and the impact of deepening political and social polarization. These factors interact in complex ways and vary among institutions and individual students, but together they help explain history's downward spiral that has accelerated over the last three decades.

*The Mismatch Between Diversity and Decolonization*

History has not kept pace with changing student demographics and the epistemic demands that this entails. The share of minority populations among students has grown faster than history has freed itself from its exclusionary Eurocentric enclosures to accommodate the interests and expectations of these students for inclusion. The mismatch between rising diversity and sluggish decolonization increasingly became a drag for history and other humanities disciplines. Data from a 2016 AHA survey shows that the steepest declines were among students of color—Black, Asian and Pacific Islanders and Latinos, who made up 5%, 3%, and 9.7%, respectively, of history graduates, far below their share of both the national and college populations. White women history graduates also declined by 10.8% compared to 9.5% for White men and "The ratio of male to female history graduates has remained fairly close to 3:2 since at least 2005."

The history curriculum at many American colleges and universities has traditionally focused more on the history of Europe and the United States than on the history of Africa and Asia. Additionally, within American history courses, the experiences and contributions of Blacks and other underrepresented minorities have often been marginalized. The Eurocentric focus of history curricula reflects a historical legacy shaped by colonialism, imperialism, and the dominance of Western perspectives in academia. European and American history have traditionally been prioritized due to their perceived centrality to world history and the development of so-called Western civilization. Clearly, curriculum standards and textbooks used in schools and universities have historically been written from a Eurocentric perspective, emphasizing the achievements and narratives of European and White Americans while downplaying the histories of Africa and Asia and their diasporas in the U.S.

For Black history, corrective efforts often take the popular axiom that "Black history is American history." This is intended to underscore the fact that, writes LaGarrett J. King, "African Americans have made significant contributions to every field of the human endeavor, including science, technology, engineering, mathematics, theology, arts, literature, athletics, politics, and especially to the American economy. In every facet of the American experience lies the story of African Americans." He argues that "the phrase insinuates a sort of shared historical legacy between white and Black people, which is not entirely accurate." It is a narrative that "promotes a singular historical consciousness, which centers white people as the main protagonists and Black people and other non-Blacks as outliers of the American narrative."

Black history ends up being trapped in a White epistemic lens. "The oppression and liberation paradigm is represented through the three major topics that have traditionally defined Black history: first, enslavement; secondly, the trials and tribulations of the post-Civil War and Reconstruction periods; and finally, the 1960s civil rights movement." Dismantling this logic requires centering Black perspectives and voices based on "six principles into our curriculum and pedagogies: systemic power, oppression, and racism; agency, resistance, and perseverance; Africa and the African Diaspora; Black joy and love; Black identities; and Black historical contention. The first three themes," he says "are common themes found in all Diaspora Black history programs. The last three themes—joy/love; Black identities; and Black historical contention—are not as widely adopted and might be perceived as controversial in many educational spaces," but they capture the complexities of Black and American histories.

America's pervasive Eurocentric historiography perpetuates the imbalances in history education. It produces and is reproduced by limited resources and expertise in non-Western history within academic institutions that reinforces the marginalization of African and Asian history. Faculty expertise, availability of course materials, and funding for research and teaching in these areas is often far less compared to resources allocated to European and White American history. Contrary to popular perceptions of universities as bastions of liberalism and "woke culture," there is widespread, if camouflaged, resistance to change within academic institutions that perpetuates the marginalization of non-Western and Black history. Efforts to diversify history curricula and include perspectives from marginalized groups often face opposition from those who are invested in maintaining the status quo. I have served at and visited several American universities where there was only one or no full time historian of Africa.

The consequences of this imbalance in history curricula for enrollments are significant, especially as student populations become more diverse. Students from underrepresented and minority backgrounds often feel alienated or disengaged from history courses that do not reflect their experiences or cultural heritage. The absence of diverse perspectives in history curricula can reinforce feelings of exclusion and perpetuate stereotypes and misconceptions. There is a growing recognition of the importance of learning about the histories and contributions of diverse communities. History courses that fail to address the experiences of non-Western peoples and Black people may be perceived as irrelevant or disconnected from students' lived experiences. Such curricula miss opportunities to foster understanding, empathy, and critical thinking among students. Diverse perspectives enrich historical scholarship and provide valuable insights into the complexities of the human experience. By centering diverse perspectives and experiences in history education, colleges and universities can create more equitable and inclusive learning environments that better serve the needs of all students. This is indispensable for the cultivation of inclusive and democratic values in an increasingly multiracial and multicultural society.

*The Chickens of Neoliberalism Come Home to Roost*

History and the humanities more generally have gradually lost out to STEM and professional degrees in business, law, and healthcare. In a world that is more and more technological, globalized, and competitive, these fields are often perceived by students, parents, and society as offering more lucrative job opportunities and greater job security, leading many students to pursue majors aligned with these disciplines at the expense of the humanities including history. Thus, economic pressures and concerns about the job market have played an important role in the decline of history majors, especially as the cost of higher education has skyrocketed, raising the calculus of return on investment.

By 2020, American student debt had skyrocketed to USD 1.6 trillion, which was higher than credit card debt. Many students and their families began to prioritize majors that they believe will lead to stable, well-paying jobs after graduation. They fear that history degrees may not directly translate into specific career paths or job opportunities. While a history degree provides valuable skills such as critical thinking, research, and communication, some students increasingly prioritize majors they perceive as offering more clearly defined career paths or higher earning potential. This is particularly appealing to first generation and minority students for whom a degree is a gateway to professional careers and upward class mobility.

The humanities including history are paying the price for the global turn to neoliberalism from the 1980s that has dictated economic policy around the world. Neoliberalism, characterized by the emphasis on free markets, deregulation, privatization, and individual responsibility has had several effects on enrollments. Overall, neoliberalism in the American economy has contributed to a devaluation of the humanities and history within higher education, leading to declining enrollments and reduced support for these disciplines. Neoliberal economic policies have engendered greater emphasis on fields perceived as directly linked to job market demands and economic growth. This shift in priorities has resulted in decreased funding, resources, and support for humanities disciplines, which are often viewed as less economically lucrative.

Neoliberal ideology also tends to view education primarily as a means to enhance individual human capital and competitiveness in the marketplace. Humanities disciplines, which may not lead directly to specific career paths, are often undervalued in this framework. Neoliberalism has also contributed significantly to the marketization of higher education, whereby universities are increasingly viewed as economic entities competing for students and funding. It has contributed to what I call the six Cs: corporatization of management, consumerization of students, casualization of faculty, commercialization of learning, commodification of knowledge, and corrosion of academic freedom.

In this competitive environment, institutions tend to prioritize programs with high enrollment numbers and revenue-generating potential, often at the expense of humanities disciplines that may attract fewer students or generate less revenue. Neoliberal economic policies, including austerity measures and budget cuts to public institutions, have placed financial pressure on colleges and universities. Humanities departments are often disproportionately affected by these cuts, leading to reduced faculty positions, course offerings, and resources. This results in fewer opportunities for students to study humanities subjects and contributes to declining enrollments. Moreover, neoliberalism has contributed to a societal emphasis on vocationalism and credentialism, whereby the value of education is often measured by its perceived utility in the labor market. As a result, students have increasingly become more inclined to pursue majors and programs that are perceived as directly applicable to specific career paths, rather than humanities disciplines that are seen as less vocational in nature.

*Caught in the Crosshairs of the Culture Wars*

The "culture wars" in the American academy and public sphere involve complex interactions among political, social, and cultural factors that have profound implications for the teaching of history. In his book, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars*, Andrew Hartman identifies some of the key protagonists: Christian conservatives opposed to the secularization of American society, neoconservatives wedded to the untrammeled projection of American global power, and professional educators keen to provide students with a comprehensive understanding of the past that fosters critical thinking, empathy, and civic engagement. The battles are fiercest in Republican controlled states that have passed gag orders against teaching unsavory aspects of American history especially slavery and systemic racism.

Texas and Florida have taken the lead in the misguided wars on "woke". Occasionally, teachers and students have prevailed in these vicious ideological and political battles as they did in Virginia in 2023 against Republican Governor, Glenn Youngkin who had sought to impose restrictive history standards. Efforts to strip the African American advanced placement (AP) course of subjects and concepts that angered conservatives led by the rightwing governor of Florida, Ron DeSantis, also eventually failed following public outcry; the College Board that had initially acquiesced reinstated much of the draft AP course that had been watered down.

The escalating ideological conflicts in American education reflect fierce contestations over identity, representation, and inclusivity in a rapidly diversifying society in which the historical hegemony of Whites and whiteness is rapidly eroding. This has triggered virulent racist resistance by the recalcitrant and resurgent forces of White supremacy that see inclusive history

as a form of indoctrination. Teachers feel increasingly disempowered and some are quitting the profession. Brendan Gillis and Julia Brookins say a "recent study by the RAND Corporation found that social studies teachers and school administrators across the country are now confused about what they can and cannot legally teach."

It is so extreme in Florida that, to quote Laura Ansley, "a single parent's objections can take a book off school shelves," under the doctrine of "parental rights." Parental intervention in school curricula matters has been turbocharged by social media which has empowered people as individuals. However, parents involvement can cut both ways, reinforcing demands for retrogressive or progressive histories. Even book bans can have unintended consequences leading "both children and adults to become more curious and read those challenged books."

It should not be surprising that as interpretive disciplines, the humanities including history, which shape the construction and hierarchies of national and group narratives, are in the crosshairs of the culture wars. Debates over whose voices and perspectives are included in historical narratives, as well as how sensitive topics such as race, gender, and colonialism are addressed, has become more contentious than ever. Advocates for greater inclusivity and diversity in historical education often clash with those who resist changes to traditional narratives or perspectives that have long privileged Eurocentrism and White American history.

Historical revisionism, the reinterpretation of past events based on new evidence or changing perspectives, is at the heart of the conflict in the culture wars. Controversial topics such as slavery, imperialism, and the treatment of Indigenous peoples are subject to ongoing reinterpretation and debate. White liberals and historians from historically underrepresented communities tend to view efforts to revise historical narratives as necessary for a more accurate understanding of the past, while conservatives and White racists see them as undermining traditional values or national identity. The incendiary ideological combat centers on the 1619 project led by Howard University professor, Nikole Hannah-Jones, published in the *New York Times* in 2019 to mark the 400th anniversary of the arrival of enslaved Africans who shaped the fabric of American history and society in all its dimensions from the economy, politics, and legal system to culture, education, and the arts. There's also the weaponization of critical race theory and the furious assaults against ill-defined "woke culture" and diversity, equity and inclusion, despite its limited impact in transforming American society including education.

The culture wars intersect with debates over academic freedom and institutional policies regarding curriculum development and classroom instruction. Questions about who should have the authority to determine what is taught in history classes, as well as the extent to which outside influences, such as political or religious organizations, should shape educational content, are central to these discussions. Conflicts have intensified as academic freedom is perceived to be under threat or when institutional policies limit the scope of historical inquiry. Media coverage and public discourse play a significant role in shaping the culture wars and influencing attitudes towards historical education. News outlets, social media platforms, and advocacy groups often frame issues related to history teaching in ways that reflect their own ideological perspectives, amplifying ideological and social divisions. Highly charged public opinion on topics such as curriculum standards, textbook selection, and the role of history education in shaping national identity has become a major influence on policy decisions and classroom practices.

The polarization of American politics and public discourse has fueled divergent perceptions of the value and relevance of the humanities and history. While different views towards the study of history have always existed, they have intensified. Polarization contributes to selective exposure and confirmation bias, whereby individuals seek out information and educational experiences that align with their pre-existing beliefs and values. This may lead some students to avoid history courses that challenge their worldview or present alternative perspectives on contentious issues. Issues related to diversity, inclusion, and representation in history courses have become more politicized, leading to conflicts over which narratives and perspectives should be included in the curriculum. This has created challenges for history departments seeking to provide a balanced and comprehensive education.

Political polarization has influenced public funding and support for humanities education, including history programs. Divisions along ideological lines impact decisions about resource allocation, funding priorities, and educational policies at the state and federal levels. This affects the availability of resources and support for history departments within colleges and universities. Moreover, political and social polarization can affect student engagement and interest in humanities disciplines. Students who perceive history courses as politically biased or irrelevant to their personal beliefs and experiences may be less likely to enroll in these courses. This can contribute to declining enrollments in history programs.

Political and social polarization also impacts the experiences of faculty and students within history departments. Divisions along ideological lines often create tensions in the classroom, limit opportunities for constructive dialogue and exchange of ideas, and contribute to a sense of alienation or marginalization among certain students or faculty members, especially students and faculty of color. Many Black and other minority faculty in the American academy routinely complain, writes Joshua Dolezal *The Chronicle of Higher Education* of facing "microaggressions from faculty and students, invalidation of their research and the devaluation of their service contributions in the tenure process."

**Public Advocacy for History**

Addressing the culture wars and assaults on history in the American academy, politics, and public discourse requires a multifaceted approach aimed at promoting constructive dialogue, critical thinking, and a more nuanced understanding of historical issues. Notwithstanding the enormous ideological and institutional obstacles, several strategies can be deployed to mitigate the culture wars and promote a more constructive approach to discussing history and fostering a culture of intellectual curiosity, empathy, respect for diverse perspectives, and informed debate. My forthcoming book, *Re-Envisioning the African and American Academies*, has a chapter devoted to repositioning the humanities and social sciences in the academies of the United States, Africa, and other parts of the world, in which I examine the intrinsic, intellectual, instrumental, and idealistic values advanced by the defendants of the humanities in detail.

Some try to safeguard the humanities by trumpeting their economic value. Audrey Williams June points out in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* that, "The wisdom of seeking a degree in the humanities is often called into question, with administrators perennially seeking to cut majors,

state officials targeting them, and professors debating how best to defend their worth. Meanwhile, the number of bachelor's degrees awarded in the humanities declined nearly 16 percent between 2012 and 2020. But a new report from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences contradicts the narrative that humanities degrees are a waste of money. College graduates in every state who majored in humanities fields like history, philosophy, and English literature outearned people with no degree, according to the academy's data… Although a degree in the humanities is often bemoaned as leading to joblessness, the academy's data show that the unemployment rate for humanities majors is similar to other college graduates, at about 3 percent."

In the struggle against the culture wars, historians should redouble their efforts to educate policy makers, the public, university administrators, and students about the intrinsic value of the humanities, including history, in fostering critical thinking, empathy, cultural understanding, and civic engagement. In a fascinating essay, Megan Threlkeld shares her experiences from a course she has taught for the past eight years "on the history wars for first-year undergraduates." Her "simple goal is to help students understand that the past is contested terrain." The students leave "the class not only with a better understanding of history and its complexities but with a clearer sense of how public education works, how state and local government works, and how politics impacts their lives. 'After doing this research . . . I feel very adamant against these bills [gag orders in red states],' one student told me, 'and it has made me want to help get rid of them.'"

Historians should highlight the ways in which studying history contributes to a well-rounded education and prepares students for diverse career paths. It is imperative to educate students and the public about the importance of critical thinking skills and media literacy to discern fact from opinion, identify bias, and evaluate sources of information critically. Teaching these skills can help students engage more thoughtfully with historical narratives and navigate complex debates in a constructive manner. History departments must consistently and robustly promote the value and relevance of history and humanities education through both broad communication drives and targeted marketing and outreach efforts aimed at prospective students, parents, guidance counselors, and employers.

Also crucial is fostering environments in which respectful dialogue and civil discourse are encouraged, both within academic institutions and in broader public forums. This entails emphasizing the value of listening to diverse perspectives, engaging in constructive debate, and finding common ground on contentious issues related to history and identity. Equally essential is promoting inclusivity and diversity in historical education by ensuring that a wide range of voices, experiences, and perspectives are represented in curriculum development, teaching materials, and classroom discussions. It is critical to acknowledge and address historical injustices, while also highlighting the contributions and experiences of marginalized groups. No less important is defending academic freedom as a cornerstone of intellectual inquiry and scholarly research. Universities cannot afford to tire of upholding the autonomy of educators and higher education institutions to pursue rigorous and impartial scholarship, free from political interference or censorship.

Combating the culture wars further requires engaging in outreach efforts to bridge divides and build understanding across ideological, cultural, and generational lines, as well as encouraging

collaboration between academic experts, community organizations, and policymakers to promote informed dialogue and address historical misconceptions or misinformation in public discourse. Such efforts entail increased investment in historical education and research at all levels, from K-12 schools to universities and cultural institutions, and providing resources for professional development, curriculum development, and public programming that promote a deeper understanding of history and its relevance to contemporary issues.

Historians are especially well placed to combat misinformation and disinformation about history itself and issues of public interest by promoting fact-checking, scholarly research, and evidence-based inquiry. They should individually and collectively encourage media outlets, social media platforms, and educational institutions to prioritize accuracy and responsible reporting when discussing historical topics. Further, they should emphasize the importance of civic engagement, democratic values, and historical literacy in fostering a healthy democracy, and encourage active participation in civic life, including voting, community organizing, and advocating for policies that promote equity, justice, and historical understanding.

**Repositioning History in the American Academy**

Repositioning history and the humanities more broadly in the American academy requires concerted efforts. In my forthcoming book, I discuss how the humanities have sought to expand their intellectual horizons by embracing the so-called new humanities, which include the digital humanities, environmental humanities, energy humanities, global humanities, urban humanities, food humanities, medical humanities, legal humanities, and public humanities. Through these new subfields, the humanities seek to engage other disciplines, particularly STEM, and infuse humanistic ways of thinking in these disciplines, and to address major social topics.

As a discipline that in its fullness should examine the past in all its dimensions, history possesses an interdisciplinary capaciousness that ought to be cultivated and publicized more intentionally. The restoration of history in American colleges and universities will largely depend on encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration with other academic fields. This requires providing support and resources for faculty development in interdisciplinary teaching and research methods, fostering collaboration and networking opportunities among faculty members across humanities disciplines and other fields to exchange ideas, sharing best practices, and developing innovative approaches to teaching and curriculum development.

Given history's inherent interdisciplinarity, historians ought to emphasize the interconnectedness of different disciplines and the value of integrating historical perspectives into interdisciplinary research, teaching, and problem-solving. They should collaborate with faculty from diverse fields to develop interdisciplinary courses, research projects, and experiential learning opportunities that highlight the relevance of history to real-world challenges and complexities. To stem their continued decline, history and the humanities must expand access and inclusivity for students from diverse backgrounds. This entails addressing barriers such as financial constraints, lack of representation in curricular materials, and systemic inequalities in educational opportunities, as well as promoting inclusivity in historical narratives and pedagogy to reflect the experiences of historically marginalized communities.

History and the humanities can also leverage general education to stem their decline in student enrollments by advocating for robust general education requirements that include humanities courses as foundational components of undergraduate education, highlighting their importance in fostering critical thinking, communication skills, cultural literacy, and ethical reasoning, regardless of a student's major or career goals. They should also strive to create opportunities for students to explore interdisciplinary connections between humanities disciplines and other fields through cross-listed courses, double majors, or interdisciplinary majors.

Other avenues for strengthening history and humanities offerings include developing flexible degree programs that allow students to tailor their academic experiences to their interests and career goals while incorporating humanities coursework; offering team-taught courses that bring together faculty from different humanities disciplines to explore complex topics or themes from multiple perspectives; encouraging collaboration and dialogue among faculty members to create dynamic and engaging learning experiences that transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries; and integrating experiential learning and community engagement opportunities into history and humanities courses to connect academic learning with real-world experiences.

Historians also ought to partner more actively with community organizations, museums, libraries, and cultural institutions to provide students with hands-on learning experiences, research opportunities, and opportunities for public engagement. Fostering such partnerships and outreach initiatives can help promote public understanding of history and its relevance to contemporary issues. Moreover, historians should improve history education in K-12 schools by providing professional development for history teachers, updating curriculum standards to reflect current scholarship and diverse perspectives, and integrating historical thinking skills into other subject areas. Fostering partnerships between universities, school districts, and community organizations to support history education initiatives can help yield invaluable public dividends for the discipline.

The public humanities—the drive among humanities scholars to go public—to speak to public audiences about the pressing issues of the day, represents a powerful impulse and opportunity for advocacy for policy changes at the institutional, state, and federal levels to support the humanities in higher education. Investments in research and scholarship in the humanities, including history, are limited, but creative ways must be devised, also involving interdisciplinary collaborations. The digital revolution raises fundamental questions about the ethical values and meaning of being human. Queries about AI have become more urgent following the release of ChatGPT by OpenAI in late 2022, which historians and other humanities scholars are best primed to address.

The possibilities and perils of artificial intelligence have captured the world's imagination from the United Nations to national governments, business, academia, and the public, each scrambling to make sense of its implications. AI poses special challenges for history. Stephen Jackson observes that, "The problems of misattribution, plagiarism, and hallucinations are particularly serious for historians. At present, the technological basis of generative AI technology seemingly stands at odds with the nature of quality historical work, which relies on accurately and reliably citing all sources of information."

Nevertheless, historians must integrate digital literacy and technology in the study of history by supporting digital humanities initiatives, providing training in digital research methods and tools, creating digital archives and resources for historical research and teaching, leveraging technology to enhance access to historical materials, and engaging students in interactive and immersive technology learning experiences. This entails developing digital archives, mapping projects, data visualization tools, and multimedia resources that make historical research and scholarship more accessible and engaging to students and the broader public.

On the other hand, informed by insights from the histories of science and technology, historians are well placed to interrogate the societal impact of AI and other emergent technologies that transcend the technical capabilities of STEM specialists, but require employing historical and humanistic modes of inquiry. As they address these questions, historians and other humanists should creatively engage the teams developing, marketing, and doing research on AI and other cutting edge technologies. This holds possibilities to leverage some of the funding currently flooding AI research to support history and the humanities that are perennially cash-strapped.

**Conclusion**

Bills targeting how history is taught in the United States, especially the history of slavery and racism, as well as other topics from LGBTQ to anti-semitism are proliferating. According to Paula M. Lantz and Emma Carter Plants, "As of April 2024, approximately 250 local, state, and federal governmental entities have introduced bills, executive orders, and other policies that restrict the content of teaching and trainings related to race and sex in public schools. While most of the enacted laws focus on K-12 settings, several states have extended prohibitions to public institutions of higher education. Currently, 10 Republican-majority state legislatures have passed bills constraining the use of specified "divisive concepts" in teaching and mandatory trainings for students, faculty, and staff in public higher education settings. In their current law-making sessions, several other states also are considering divisive concepts and related anti-diversity bills that would affect higher education."

Historians and other academics have a responsibility to vigorously fight against the weaponization of history and the humanities more broadly. It is reassuring, as James Grossman, the Executive Director of the American Historical Association, tells us, "The AHA, in collaboration with PEN America, the American Association of University Professors, and the Association of American Colleges and Universities—and supported by more than 150 other organizations, including all regional higher education accreditors—has publicly opposed such efforts. More than 40 nonpartisan organizations, including associations of school boards and superintendents, have formed the Learn from History coalition to educate Americans on the threats such policies pose to public education, democracy, and civic culture."

According to the AHA's Mapping the Landscape of Secondary US History Education initiative as reported by Grossman, the facts beg to differ. "Our key finding is clear: if a typical American history classroom exists, its teachers generally are not framing our nation's history in the specific ways targeted by "divisive concepts" legislation. They are not teaching their students to hate their country, their grandparents, or their peers whose backgrounds and identities differ from their own. If teachers are emphasizing the significance of racism to the

history of the United States, it is because most professional historians agree that ideas about race have been among the most important forces in shaping the American past."

History in the singular, or histories in the plural, are neither inherently positive nor negative, progressive or regressive. It depends on what type of history it is, why and how it is constructed, preserved, disseminated, and consumed, how it is used, abused, and instrumentalized. For history to be integral to democratic education and the democratic project it must be inclusive, embrace different stories, question the blinding conceits of the self-referential epistemic gaze of the powerful, whether nations, groups, or individuals, out of which dialogic understanding of the past and present is constructed, and the future is expansively, critically, and creatively imagined. Histories that engage multiple narratives allow students of divergent backgrounds to realistically see themselves, to learn the radical hospitality of welcoming otherness in their various spatio-temporal contexts. Such histories also reinscribe complexities and contradictions in sanitized and mythologized national histories.

Critical history shakes students out of the comforts of complacency and lazy self-affirmation, of imagined exclusive and immutable identities. It makes them appreciate that their being and becoming emanate through interrelationality and inter-subjectivity, what is called in Southern Africa, Ubuntu, that a person is a person through other people. Rigorous multi-dimensional and multi-perspective history is an antidote to manufactured mass ignorance, the cesspool that breeds misunderstanding, misinformation, misinterpretation, and misrepresentation. Much of the world is currently gripped by rising anger, fear, and uncertainty about the future, which is fomenting authoritarian and xenophobic populisms and democratic recessions. Rigorous historical knowledge and debate has never been more crucial than it is now, if this dangerous tide is to be stemmed and reversed. THANK YOU!