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Reflections on Special Section, “Conservative Public History”

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Abstract: These Reflections provide critical feedback on the special section, “Conservative Public History.” The author commends the guest editors for their important compilation, which is a timely and necessary contribution to the field of public history. However, he criticizes their choice of language by framing the collection as “conservative” versus expressions such as “right wing” or “authoritarian.” To better understand and contextualize the essays, the author recommends Ruth Ben-Ghiat’s book, *Strongmen*, and the essay, “The rise of end times fascism,” by Naomi Klein and Astra Taylor.

Keywords: public history; conservative; authoritarian; right wing; strongman; fascism

I commend the editors of this special section for bringing together multiple essays which critically examine the shift to the right in public history across the globe. Addressing the United States in their introduction, the editors solicited contributors who focus on Brazil, Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Mexico, Spain, Britain, Sweden, Denmark, India, Japan, Russia, and the Philippines. They astutely note that these public histories share key features: “the politicization of heritage, the strategic deployment of nostalgia, and the instrumentalization of the past to construct exclusionary identities.” The editors argue that public history “must not remain neutral in the face of such threats...” I completely agree but the premise on which this argument rests is flawed. Public history, like academic history, is never neutral. Historians raise certain questions and downplay or ignore others. We examine only particular evidence. And, we bring our values and ethical assumptions to our work. All of this renders neutrality an impossibility and, if claimed, a lie. Further, the editors argue: “History has increasingly become a site of ideological conflict: a battleground for defining national identity, collective memory, and the permissible boundaries of critique.” Their identification of the contemporary state of history is accurate and of great significance. However, I would differ with the

assertion that history is increasingly becoming a site of ideological conflict. History has always been a place for sharp ideological differences. The counter narrative presented by Raoul Peck in his television mini series, “Exterminate All the Brutes” on the exploitation and genocide of European colonialism is one excellent case study.¹ Noam Chomsky writes about the “the elitist bias that dominates the writing of history.” This flows from his observation: “The assumption that the colonial power is benevolent and has the interests of the natives at heart is as old as imperialism itself.”² And this assumption has driven much of what is deeply flawed about history and commemoration and continual efforts to assert an indigenous or people’s history. In the United States, the celebration of Columbus Day and the mythology compared to the reality of Thanksgiving are but two examples of many.³

Overall, this special section is a timely and necessary contribution to the field of public history. I question, however, the guest editors’ choice of language, in particular their decision to identify the collection “Conservative Public History.” I recognize that they had a difficult choice of language. However, I would have preferred “authoritarian” or “right wing.” “Conservative” conjures up in my mind caution, moderation, skepticism regarding change, preservation of the status quo. The politics of the case studies in this special section go far beyond this definition. Hence, the use of more stark, sharply defined language such as “authoritarian” or “right wing” would work better. However, this observation in no way serves to undermine the significance of the content of the essays, which collectively provide a dramatic warning as to how public history has shifted in recent years.

¹ “Exterminate All the Brutes,” <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8396314/>.

² Noam Chomsky, “Objectivity and Liberal Scholarship,” in *American Power and the New Mandarins – Historical and Political Essays* (New York: Random House, 1967), 23–158, 122 and 58.

³ James Riding In, “The Politics of the Columbus Celebration: A Perspective of Myth and Reality in United States Society,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 17, no. 3 (1993): 1–9; Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz and Dina Gilio-Whitaker, “Columbus Discovered America” in *All the Real Indians Died Off and 20 Other Myths about Native Americans* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016), 23–31; Philip Deloria, “The Invention of Thanksgiving – Massacres, myths, and the making of the great November holiday,” *The New Yorker*, November 25, 2019.

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And the editors present a clear challenge that public historians must do much more and act with a greater sense of urgency to counteract the dire trends across the globe.

To better understand and contextualize these essays, I would recommend Ruth Ben-Ghiat's book, *Strongmen*.⁴ Her extensive list of protagonists includes several relevant to the collection – Modi of India, Putin of Russia, Bolsonaro of Brazil (currently out of power but still posing a threat), Duterte of the Philippines, Franco of Spain, and, of course, Trump. And, as of this writing, the Japanese parliament has just elected Sanae Takachi as prime minister. She is an ardent nationalist who models herself after Margaret Thatcher and has sanitized Japan's role in World War II.

Ben-Ghiat's book examines the evolution of authoritarianism. She begins with the fascists Benito and Adolf Hitler. She argues that in each case, conservative elites, rather than popular acclaim, got the strongman into power. Conservatives such as Mitch McConnell in the United States did the same for Trump. Key issues include virility and decline of male status, loss of moral clarity, ethno-nationalism combined with racism. Mussolini and Hitler, who each grew out of post World War I chaos, radically redefined public history to serve their purposes. Following World War II, decolonization and the Cold War fueled the second strongman era which resulted largely from military coups. With military coups less common by the time Augusto Pinochet of Chile left office in 1990, elections became the new path for strongmen to come to power. "The idea of the strongman who brings his nation to greatness," Ben-Ghiat writes, "is a foundation of authoritarian history." She asserts that the strongman brand of nationalism is "founded on emotions of fear and victimhood."⁵ She devotes individual chapters to propaganda, virility, corruption, and violence. Twitter, she writes, and more recently, Truth Social, have been for Trump "what newsreels were for the fascists: a direct channel to the people that keep him constantly in the news."⁶ In the final section of her book, Ben-Ghiat presents chapters on resistance and endings. In her conclusion, she identifies the strongman's real talents as those of "the street fighter and the con man." Ben-Ghiat declares: "The strongman brand of charisma, equal parts seduction and threat, attracts many

followers by celebrating male authority."⁷ To combat authoritarian public history, it is vital to understand how authoritarians gain and consolidate power and Ben-Ghiat's book is a useful source in this regard.

While it is critically important to understand historical fascism and its relevance for today, projects exemplified by Tim Snyder and Jason Stanley, this approach is not sufficient for our contemporary challenges.⁸ To that end, I recommend the article by Naomi Klein and Astra Taylor, "The rise of end times fascism." Klein and Taylor assert that "...we are not up against adversaries we have seen before. We are up against end times fascism" where white nationalist Christians and billionaire tech bros both subscribe to an apocalyptic vision in a strange alliance brokered by the strongman Trump. They argue that the "governing ideology of the far right in our age of escalating disasters has become a monstrous, supremacist survivalism." Klein and Taylor believe that the "bunkered nation" lies at the heart of the MAGA agenda and of end times fascism. Central goals include hardening national boundaries and expunging all enemies, foreign and domestic. The authors argue that three material developments have "accelerated end times fascism's apocalyptic appeal": the climate crisis; COVID-19; and the rapid advancement and adoption of AI. Klein and Taylor conclude that to overcome end times fascism, we must develop a radical counter narrative – "A story not of end times, but of better times; not of separation and supremacy, but of interdependence and belonging; not of escaping, but staying put and staying faithful to the troubled earthly reality in which we are enmeshed and bound."⁹

Bionote

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⁴ Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Strongmen – Mussolini to the Present* (New York: Norton, 2020).

⁵ Ben-Ghiat, 65 and 89.

⁶ Ben-Ghiat, 127.

⁷ Ben-Ghiat, 252 and 250.

⁸ Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny – Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (New York: Duggan Books, 2017); Jason Stanley, *Erasing History – How Fascists Rewrite the Past to Control the Future* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2024).

⁹ Naomi Klein and Astra Taylor, "The rise of end times fascism," <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2025/apr/13/end-times-fascism-far-right-trump-musk>.