

Caroline Silveira Bauer, Tunde Decker, Jerome de Groot* and Jimena Perry

Conservative Public History: Special Section Introduction

<https://doi.org/10.1515/iph-2025-0035>

Published online November 14, 2025

Keywords: conservatism; right-wing; far-right; contested histories; public history; global public history

This special section of *International Public History* critically engages with and outlines what we term ‘Conservative Public History.’ The articles presented here investigate how right-wing political movements across the globe appropriate professional historiographical methods, historical narratives, commemorative practices, public memory, and heritage to legitimize their ideological agendas. In a series of short, urgent interventions scholars from around the world express their alarm and concern at the ways in which the past is being weaponized, traduced, misused, and censored. These brief essays are intended as snapshots of the current state of affairs, illustrations of contemporary practice, and as a collective articulation of concern. They show the acceleration and diversification of conservative, alt-right, neocon, nationalist, traditionalist practices relating to the past in public, a set of associated and deliberated actions we group together under the term ‘Conservative Public History.’ This phrase outlines something we understand as a praxis, an ideology, and an approach; a template for activism and a mode for engaging with the past. ‘Conservative Public History’ differs according to context and situation, but in collecting these case-studies under this umbrella term we seek to understand, conceptualize, recognize, and, ultimately, respond to what we see as a global phenomenon.

Around the world, right-wing populist movements are strategically mobilizing historical interpretation to promote their platforms and contest liberal norms. When in power, these groups advocate for strong state authority and

established hierarchies. In opposition they promote ‘alternative,’ ‘de-ideologized,’ and ‘true’ versions of history. In both scenarios, they commonly promote conservative, nationalist, and traditionalist values alongside enduring moral structures.¹ A defining characteristic among them is their insistence on national identity and sovereignty – often framed in opposition to immigration, multiculturalism, and international governance structures.² There is an affective mobilization of the past aimed at fostering certain behaviors.³

In the United Kingdom, the activities of Restore Trust, a conservative group of National Trust members, target progressive heritage institutions; in Florida, Republican lawmakers intervene in public education; and in parts of Latin America, authoritarian tendencies threaten cultural and academic freedom. These actions are rarely isolated – they are coordinated, well-resourced, and ideologically driven. At the same time, historical scholarship faces a multidimensional crisis: defunded, disciplined by neoliberal policy, marginalized in public institutions, and increasingly disconnected from broader civic discourse. ‘Conservative Public History’ frequently employs historiographical methods shared by professional historians in writing history. The use of historical sources, the appeals to the

1 Ruth Wodak, *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean* (London: Sage, 2015). On definitions of right-wing populism in various contexts see for instance, David Cadier and Kacper Szulecki, “Populism, Historical Discourse and Foreign Policy: The Case of Poland’s Law and Justice Government,” in *Historical Memory and Foreign Policy*, eds. Lina Klymenko and Marco Siddi (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 49–70; Ezgi Elçi, “Right-Wing Populism in Turkey and the 2023 Elections,” *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 24, no. 2 (2024), 297–317; Ajay Gudavarthy, *India After Modi: Populism and the Right* (New Delhi: Bloomsbury India, 2019).

2 See the essays in *Claiming the People’s Past. Populist Politics of History in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Berber Bevernage et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024).

3 Fernando Nicolazzi, “Negacionismo e usos afetivos do passado no Brasil contemporâneo,” *Passés Futurs* 13 (2023) available at *Politika*, <https://www.politika.io/fr/article/negacionismo-e-usos-afetivos-do-passado-no-brasil-contemporaneo>. See also The Council of Europe’s Third Annual Forum for History Education’s General Report, “Reinforcing Historical Awareness and Culture through Higher Education: Threats and Challenges” (2024), available at <https://rm.coe.int/prems-015725-gbr-2509-rapport-forum-bologne-web-a4/1680b5152f>.

*Corresponding author: Jerome de Groot, EACW, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL, UK,
E-mail: jerome.degroot@manchester.ac.uk

Caroline Silveira Bauer, History, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre, 90040-060, Brazil

Tunde Decker, History, Osun State University, Osogbo, Nigeria
Jimena Perry, History, Iona University, New Rochelle, NY, USA

authority of ‘professionals,’ and strategic citation are among the tactics deployed to lend legitimacy to conservative narratives, which often embrace denialism.⁴

Economically, contemporary right-wing ideologies span a spectrum from unregulated capitalism and minimal state intervention to protectionist models that seek to safeguard national industries. Despite these variations, they are united in their rejection of leftist, liberal, socialist, and communist frameworks. In tandem with this economic vision, many such movements advocate for law and order, family values, and a glorified, often mythologized, cultural heritage. While some operate within democratic institutions, others – especially those on the far-right – embrace non-democratic solutions and exclusionary or authoritarian discourses, promoting xenophobia, historical revisionism/denialism, conspiracism, and strongman politics.⁵ The global landscape is diverse: from the Donald Trump-led MAGA movement in the United States to the populist administrations of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Javier Milei in Argentina or the autocracy of Vladimir Putin’s Russia, these movements reframe historical discourse in ways that respond to perceived threats to tradition, sovereignty, and economic autonomy.⁶

In the United States, libertarianism represents one ideological strand of the contemporary right. It has long had a formal presence through the Libertarian Party and exerts

influence within both major political parties.⁷ Distinct from social conservatism and economic nationalism, libertarianism centers on the principles of personal autonomy, voluntary association, and limited government. It rejects state-imposed morality and protectionist economic policies, aligning instead with free-market economics and expansive civil liberties.

Closely related to libertarianism – but distinguishable in intent and application – is neoliberalism, a political-economic doctrine that gained ascendancy in the late 20th century. Embodied in the policies of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, neoliberalism advances deregulation, privatization, and a diminished role for the state.⁸ The central premise of neoliberalism is that market mechanisms allocate resources more effectively than state planning. This ideology often manifests through reductions in public services, liberalized trade regimes, and the transfer of government functions to private entities. While once associated with the political center-right, neoliberalism has influenced a wide range of governments across the ideological spectrum.

Conservatism, in turn, remains a crucial lens for understanding right-wing historiographical agendas. Far from being a monolithic doctrine, it is a tradition grounded in the preservation of social order, institutional continuity, and cultural values. Conservatives often favor gradual change, respect for authority, and the defense of national traditions.⁹ Social conservatives promote religious values, gender norms, and cultural nationalism, whereas economic conservatives support low taxation, deregulation, and entrepreneurial freedom. In the United States, conservatism has been closely tied to the Republican Party, though the party includes a range of ideological positions – from libertarian and centrist to Christian nationalist.¹⁰

While proponents argue that conservatism fosters social stability and cohesion, critics contend that it can reinforce systemic inequality, resist progressive reform, and

4 Fernando Nicolazzi, “Os historiadores e seus públicos: regimes historiográficos, recepção da história e história pública,” *Revista História Hoje* 8 (2019): 203–22; Fernando Nicolazzi, “Between Discipline and Profession: Historical Studies and Their Public Relevance in Brazil,” in *Professional Historians in Public: Old and New Roles Revisited*, eds. Berber Bevernage and Lutz Raphael (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023), 163–84.

5 Luciana Ballestrin, “Post-democracy and Neoliberalism in Contemporary Latin America: The Rise of the Left Turns and the Brazilian Democratic Failure,” in *The Brazilian Left in the 21st Century: Conflict and Conciliation in Peripheral Capitalism*, eds. Vladimir Puzone and Luis Felipe Miguel (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 259–83 Cas Mudde, *The Far Right Today* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019); Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum, *A Lot of People Are Saying* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019).

6 See, for instance, Fernando Nicolazzi, “El negacionismo como negocio. Usos del pasado y comercio de la historia en el bolsonarismo,” in *Pasado presente. Historia, memoria y política en América Latina (siglo XXI)*, ed. Fabio Wasserman (Madrid: Sílex Ultramar, 2024), 195–221; Corinne Fowler, *Green Unpleasant Land: Creative Responses to Rural England’s Colonial Connections* (Peepal Tree Press, 2020); Pablo Batalía, *Los nuevos odres del nacionalismo español* (Gijón: Trea, 2021); Ann-Cathrine Jungar, ed., *The Nordic Populist Radical Right* (London: Routledge, 2024); Andrey Oleynikov, “Populism, Presentism, and the Prospects of Critical Historical Thinking in Russia,” *Claiming the People’s Past*, 192–208; and the essays in this volume.

7 Brian Doherty, *Radicals for Capitalism: A Freewheeling History of the Modern American Libertarian Movement* (New York: Public Affairs, 2007).

8 David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

9 Roger Scruton, *How to Be a Conservative* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

10 See Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Nicole Hemmer, *Partisans* (New York: Basic Books, 2022); John White, *What Happened to the Republican Party?* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015). For a discussion of the complexity of conservatism under Trump’s first administration see Michael Barber and Jeremy C. Pope, “Conservatism in the Era of Trump,” *Perspectives on Politics* 17, no. 3 (2019): 719–36.

marginalize dissenting voices. The growing tension between progressive public history and conservative re-interpretations of the past reflects a deeper disciplinary and political divide. History has increasingly become a site of ideological conflict: a battleground for defining national identity, collective memory, and the permissible boundaries of critique.¹¹

The United States provides a stark illustration of this phenomenon. Prior to Donald Trump's second term, a manifesto known as Project 2025 outlined a systematic agenda to reshape public institutions, including those dedicated to history and memory. The Heritage Foundation, among other politically conservative think tanks, has played a central role in this ideological realignment, advocating for a vision of history centered on nationalism, cultural unity, and state power. This led directly to Trump's Executive Order of March 27, 2025, titled *Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History*, which accused national museums of ideological bias and targeted the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture and the American Women's History Museum.¹²

The Executive Order criticized so-called 'revisionist' historical narratives for fostering division and national shame and called for public monuments and cultural institutions to emphasize patriotic achievement and unity. It directed the Secretary of the Interior to investigate monument removals and ensure that federal institutions portray historical figures in celebratory rather than critical terms. In this context, museums are expected not to question but to affirm national greatness.

This Executive Order functions as a blueprint for identifying what we term 'Conservative Public History.' It lays out an ideological vision, a historical methodology, and a set of prescriptive actions that redefine the role of public history. It reveals how historical interpretation might be co-

opted to validate state power, suppress contested memory, and undermine pluralistic narratives. Key cultural battlefields include statues, Black history, colonial legacies, and trans rights. Here, 'Conservative Public History' operates simultaneously as discourse and strategy, medium and message. Critiquing these repressive actions might offer us a way of articulating a response to the ongoing weaponization of history and commemoration.

The response from the historical profession was swift. At the 2025 National Council on Public History (NCPH) conference in Montreal, the Executive Order's announcement was met with collective alarm. Under the theme of 'Solidarity' public historians convened emergency sessions addressing the defunding of archives, the dismantling of community-based projects, and the erosion of cultural institutions. This moment underscored the growing sense that public history must not remain neutral in the face of such threats but must assert itself as a space of resistance and democratic engagement.

Although much attention has focused on the U.S. context, what we call 'Conservative Public History' is a global phenomenon. Right-wing movements in Latin America, Europe, and Asia are engaging in similar projects, often borrowing language and strategies from one another. This special section argues that while conservative public histories vary in form, they share key features: the politicization of heritage, the strategic deployment of nostalgia, and the instrumentalization of the past to construct exclusionary identities.

Latin America provides especially illuminating examples. At the 2024 IFPH Explorers event, 'Más allá del fascismo: Una agenda de investigación sobre la nueva ultraderecha en América Latina,' (Beyond Fascism: A Research Agenda on the New Far Right in Latin America) sociologist Stéphanie Alenda presented her analysis of the Chilean right's ideological evolution.¹³ Drawing on her book *Anatomía de la derecha chilena* (Anatomy of the Chilean Right-Wing), Alenda identifies three competing tendencies: a Catholic social-Christian tradition, a neoliberal orientation influenced by the Chicago School, and an ultra-liberal, digitally driven libertarianism.¹⁴ These strands often conflict but

¹¹ See Edmund Fawcett, *Conservatism: The Fight for a Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020); George Hawley, *Conservatism in a Divided America* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022); John Ehrenberg, *White Nationalism and the Republican Party* (London and New York: Routledge, 2022).

¹² Published March 27, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/03/restoring-truth-and-sanity-to-american-history/>. This is part of an ongoing attack on history, heritage, and Equality/Diversity/Inclusion initiatives (also known as DEI) that continue up to the moment of publication and into the future, see for instance Graham Bowley, Jennifer Schuessler, and Robin Pogrebin, "White House Announces Comprehensive Review of Smithsonian Exhibitions," *New York Times*, August 12, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/12/arts/design/smithsonian-exhibitions-review-white-house-trump.html>.

¹³ IFPH Explorers (International Federation for Public History). *Allá del Fascismo: Una agenda de investigación sobre la nueva ultraderecha en América Latina*. Available on the IFPH Explorers YouTube channel. See also the Histories at Risk resources on contested and challenging history: <https://historiesatrisk.com/har-blog-posts/>.

¹⁴ Stéphanie Alenda, ed., *Anatomía de la derecha chilena: Estado, mercado y valores en tiempos de cambio* (Santiago de Chile: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2020).

coexist within broader conservative movements, allowing for both adaptability and ideological contradiction. According to Alenda, this flexibility is key to the right's appeal among younger generations and its resilience in rapidly shifting cultural landscapes.

Parallel developments can be observed in Argentina and Brazil. In an IFPH Explorers session titled 'La historia pública en Argentina ante la actual coyuntura' (Public History in Argentina in the Current Context) Lucía Abbatista analyzed how Argentina's libertarian right envisions a minimal state confined to security and defense.¹⁵ This model sidelines investment in culture, education, and public memory infrastructure. Museums, archives, and cultural centers have faced budgetary abandonment, threatening the continuity of collective historical knowledge. Abbatista emphasizes that this withdrawal is not simply financial but ideological – an attack on the foundations of civic participation. In this context, public history could become a counterforce: participatory, community-based, and rooted in democratic values.¹⁶

In Brazil, a vigorous debate centers on whether conservative history popularization initiatives qualify as public history under Ricardo Santhiago's definition – history made with the public and for a broader public, equally possessing a reflexive dimension: it considers who the public of history is.¹⁷ In this sense, examples of 'Conservative Public History' include the media producer Brasil Paralelo and the Politically Incorrect Guides publications which have been an editorial success. Countless profiles across social media platforms replicate these discourses and practices.

15 IFPH Explorers (International Federation for Public History). *La historia pública en Argentina ante la actual coyuntura*. YouTube video (2025), at 1:27:35. Available on the IFPH Explorers YouTube channel.

16 For Latin America, see Stéphanie Alenda, ed., *Anatomía de la derecha chilena: Estado, mercado y valores en tiempos de cambio* (Santiago de Chile: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2020); Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, "Right-Wing Populism and the Idea of Democracy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, eds. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 56–75; Federico Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017); and María Esperanza Casullo, *¿Por qué funciona el populismo? El discurso que sabe construir explicaciones y culpas* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI Editores, 2019).

17 Ricardo Santhiago, "História pública e autorreflexividade: da prescrição ao processo," *Tempo E Argumento*, 10 (2018): 286–309; Ricardo Santhiago, "Pode-se falar de uma história pública brasileira? Can we speak of a Brazilian public history?," in *Que história pública queremos? What Public History Do We Want?* eds. Ana Maria Mauad, Ricardo Santhiago, and Viviane Trindade Borges (São Paulo: Letra e Voz, 2018), 323–38; Ricardo Santhiago, "Duas palavras, muitos significados: Alguns comentários sobre a história pública no Brasil" in *História pública no Brasil: Sentidos e itinerários*, eds. Ana Maria Mauad, Juniele Rabélo de Almeida and Ricardo Santhiago (São Paulo: Letra e Voz, 2016), 23–36.

Researchers in the international network Direitas, História e Memória [Rights, History, and Memory] – such as Odilon Caldeira Neto – focus on historicizing contemporary conservatism through a transnational lens, a perspective deemed fundamental for understanding the phenomenon, its simultaneity across countries, and the reception, appropriation, and exchange of discourses.¹⁸

Similar patterns unfold elsewhere and are analyzed in this issue of *International Public History*. In Spain, Gustavo Alares López explores how far-right groups invoke national nostalgia to reframe heritage. In the Andean region, María Elena Bedoya Hidalgo interrogates the role of whiteness and Hispanism in constructing conservative discourse. Julia Håkansson reflects on the ideological foundations of nationalist memory in Sweden and Denmark. Jessica Moody assesses how heritage institutions like the National Trust in the UK have become flashpoints in cultural debates. Alexandra Kolesnik and Aleksandr Rusanov document state-backed historical revisionism in Russia. Shalini Sharma examines how Hindu nationalism recasts historical narratives in India. Rommel Curaming, from the Philippines, traces competing interpretations of the Marcos dictatorship. Yutaka Yoshida and Emi Tozawa address Japanese revisionism in wartime memory. Additional contributions address localized struggles: Matthew Stallard on cultural conflict in the UK's Black Country; Owen Hurcum on transphobia across a range of disciplines and practices (mainly archaeological) in the UK; Tony Bryan on Hispanophobia in Iberian revisionism; Jimena Perry on anti-Indigenous biases in Colombian history; and Gema Kloppe-Santamaría on the revival of Christian conservatism in Mexico. Caroline Silveira Bauer and Tatyana de Amaral Maya analyze the diffusion of Brazilian conservative public histories on YouTube.

Together these case studies illustrate the diversity and coincidence of right-wing approaches to the past. Although framed in national or local terms, they are often connected through transnational ideologies and digital platforms. What emerges is a pattern of public historical production that is calculated, performative, and increasingly strategic.

These developments present pressing challenges for the field of public history. How is the past being mobilized by conservative movements? What are the implications for public history's self-understanding as a progressive, participatory, or democratic endeavor? Can the discipline

18 See Odilon Caldeira Neto, *Neofascism and the Far Right in Brazil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025), 'Bolsonarismo, a Phenomenon of Brazil? Own Making?' *NACLA Report on the Americas* 56 (2024), 56–63, and 'Neofascism in Brazil, from the Local to the Global?' *Esboços* 29 (2023), 579–98.

maintain its critical stance, or will it be absorbed into broader projects of ideological consolidation?

This special section brings together voices from diverse global contexts to answer these questions. The articles included critical reflections on recent developments often overlooked in mainstream scholarly discussions. They offer not only documentation but intervention mapping the contested terrain of public history today and asserting that the struggle over the past is inseparable from struggles over the present and future.

Research ethics: Not applicable.

Informed consent: Not applicable.

Author contributions: All authors have accepted responsibility for the entire content of this manuscript and approved its submission.

Use of Large Language Models, AI and Machine Learning Tools: None declared.

Conflict of interest: The authors state no conflict of interest.

Research funding: Caroline Silveira Bauer received a Research Productivity Grant (403461/2023-5) and is a researcher (403461/2023-5) with the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq). Jerome de Groot was supported by an AHRC Network Grant for the 'Histories at Risk' ref. AH/W003937/1.

Data availability: Not applicable.