

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

History and the Politics of Nostalgia

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The politics of nostalgia has become a dominant theme in the United States, where *HEQ* is headquartered.¹ But the US is not exceptional in this regard. Far-right populist movements around the world have made effective use of wistful slogans about the past, upending long-standing political orders.² Argentinian president Javier Milei, for instance, has coupled his signature “¡Viva la libertad, carajo!” with “Make Argentina Great Again.”³ Italian prime minister Giorgia Meloni ran and won on an uncharacteristic “Italy first” platform, borrowing “great again” themes for both Italy and “the West.”⁴ And in places like France,⁵ Spain,⁶ Germany,⁷ and the

¹Gabriella Elgenius and Jens Rydgren, “Nationalism and the Politics of Nostalgia,” *Sociological Forum* 37 (Dec. 2022), 1231–41; Veronique de Rugy, “MAGA’s Manufacturing Nostalgia,” *National Review*, March 12, 2025, <https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/magas-manufacturing-nostalgia/>.

²Emma Bubola, “Far-Right Leaders Rally in Spain to ‘Make Europe Great Again,’” *New York Times*, Feb. 8, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/08/world/europe/far-right-spain-rally.html>.

³“Milei Meets with Trump at CPAC, Adapts His Slogan for Argentina,” *Buenos Aires Times*, Feb. 24, 2024, <https://www.batimes.com.ar/news/argentina/milei-meets-with-trump-at-cpac-adapts-his-slogan-for-argentina.phtml>; Ryan Dubé, “Milei Looks for Trump’s Help to ‘Make Argentina Great Again,’” *Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 18, 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/world/americas/javier-milei-argentina-trump-visit-048b5178>; Jon Lee Anderson, “Javier Milei Wages War on Argentina’s Government,” *New Yorker*, Dec. 2, 2024, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/12/09/javier-milei-wages-war-on-argentinas-government>.

⁴Julia Khrebtan-Hörhager and Evgeniya Pyatovskaya, “Giorgia Meloni - The Political Provocateur Set to Become Italy’s First Far-Right Leader since Mussolini,” *Conversation*, Sept. 19, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/giorgia-meloni-the-political-provocateur-set-to-become-italys-first-far-right-leader-since-mussolini-190116>; Paul Kirby, “Giorgia Meloni: Italy’s Far-Right Wins Election and Vows to Govern for All,” *BBC News*, Sept. 26, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-63029909>.

⁵Thomas Adamson, “Marine Le Pen Brought the Far Right to France’s Front Door,” *AP News*, April 1, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/marine-le-pen-profile-far-right-france-court-54980c712a58928af11f47c81b039a94>; Marion Sollety and Sarah Paillou, “The Billionaire Who Wants to Make France Great Again,” *Politico*, April 28, 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/pierre-edouard-sterin-pericles-france-politics-marine-le-pen/>.

⁶Sam Jones, “From ‘Cranks’ to Contenders: How Spain’s Far-Right Vox Party Is Rising toward Power,” *Guardian*, June 11, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/11/from-cranks-to-contenders-how-spains-far-right-vox-party-is-rising-toward-power>.

⁷Ed Turner, “Far-Right AfD Tops German Poll for First Time - Just Weeks after Friedrich Merz’s Election Win,” *Conversation*, April 25, 2025, <https://theconversation.com/far-right-afd-tops-german-poll-for-first-time-just-weeks-after-friedrich-merz-election-win-255254>; Jessica Parker, “Why More Young Men

Netherlands,⁸ these kind of sentiments have fueled the emergence of right-wing political movements. On the other hand, two recent elections have shown the limits of such rhetoric; both Canada and Australia decisively rejected politicians who were viewed as too much in step with President Trump and the MAGA emphasis on disruption, tariffs, and nativist messaging. And very recently Marine Le Pen was barred from running in France's next election. Our world is in the midst of dramatic change in how we view not just the present and the future, but also the past.

Nostalgia is a relative of historical memory, drawing on the past to inform the present. Yet it does so through a distorted lens—one shaped to reduce our field of vision rather than expand it. Whereas historians strive to reconstruct former worlds in their full complexity, nostalgists offer a past in which life was both better and simpler. Recapturing former glory, for the nostalgist, requires only the courage to return to what once was.

As historians remind us, however, nostalgic remembrance is a highly selective form of recollection. For people of the past, life was full of problems to solve and dilemmas to navigate. Rather than being dragged into a troubled future, they actively shaped the world that came to be. The pursuit of progress, however they defined it, demanded uncertain steps forward, not confident leaps backward.

In this issue, *HEQ* takes us back to key formative periods in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, illustrating the ways in which people of the past worked to address the challenges that surrounded them. The topics of concern in this issue—language education, school infrastructure, early childhood education, and the need for parental engagement—represented real problems that demanded messy, real-world solutions. Rather than seeing their worlds as “great,” people of this period recognized major challenges posed by immigration, public health, child development, and school attendance. And they cobbled together local solutions that were anything but grand.

In the first article in the issue, Maxwell Greenberg offers a case study of the German language program in the Milwaukee Public Schools across the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Beyond simply recounting the implementation of the program and the challenges it faced, “Standardizing Americanization: District Consolidation and the Making of the German Language Program in Milwaukee’s Public Schools, 1846–1918” reveals how school policies of the past embraced a multilingual approach to Americanization.

In the second article in the issue, Catriel Fierro examines school construction efforts in nineteenth-century Philadelphia. “‘The Unpleasant Duty of Vain Complaint’: School Building Hygiene, Educational Administration, and the Historical Roots of Late Nineteenth-Century Clinical Discourse in Philadelphia,” looks at overcrowding and ventilation problems in what was the nation’s second largest city for much of that period. The fact that Philadelphia trailed behind other cities in basic sanitary provisions, Fierro argues, ultimately led to a push for clinics and dispensaries.

in Germany Are Turning to the Far Right,” BBC News, Feb. 9, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cy082dn7rkqo>.

⁸Hanne Cokelaere and Eva Hartog, “How Geert Wilders Turned All Corners of Dutch Society into Far Right Voters,” *Politico*, May 16, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/geert-wilders-dutch-society-far-right-voters-migration-refugees-housing-crisis-freedom-party/>.

In “Comparing Concerted Efforts in the US to Establish a Unified Approach to Early Instruction in the Early Twentieth Century and Twenty-First Century,” R. Clarke Fowler examines moves to establish consistent aims in grades pre-K through 3. Looking at the US in the early twentieth century and in the twenty-first century, Fowler argues that today’s unifiers are attempting to achieve three of the same goals that their predecessors pursued a century earlier: increased child activity, teacher autonomy, and usage of early instructional practices through grade 3.

The final feature article in the issue is by Spanish scholars Seila Soler, Pablo Rosser, Gladys Merma-Molina, and María Luisa Rico-Gómez. In “Irregular School Attendance in Elementary Schools in Spain during the First Third of the Twentieth Century: A Local or Structural Educational Issue?,” the authors explain the factors that led to school absenteeism in early twentieth-century Spain—the most important of which was parental disengagement.

The issue closes with a Policy Dialogue between Kim Tolley and Dorit Reiss on vaccines in public schools. Historians of education will be familiar with the former of those participants—Kim Tolley is a past-president of the History of Education Society and the former managing editor of *HEQ*. Her most recent book is *Vaccine Wars: The Two-Hundred-Year Fight for School Vaccinations*. Dorit Reiss is Professor of Law and the James Edgar Hervey⁵⁰ Chair of Litigation at the University of California San Francisco, College of Law. Her current research and activities focus on legal and policy issues related to vaccines.

Ultimately, what this issue shows us is that the past may not have been so great after all. If we take seriously the people who lived in the past, we see that their dissatisfaction with their world is what brought about the present. That doesn’t mean that the world we inhabit is perfect, or even necessarily better than the one that preceded us. But it does mean that the answers to our current problems are less likely to be behind us than they are to lie ahead.