

North American universities and the rise of Trump through the eyes of professors | Interview with Hal Langfur

Hal Langfur*

University of Buffalo
Buffalo, New York, United States of America

Interview conducted via email in August 2025, at the invitation of Professor Dr. Marina Monteiro Machado (State University of Rio de Janeiro) to Professor Hal Langfur.

* Professor at the University of Buffalo, College of Arts and Sciences, Department of History. PhD from the University of Texas; MA from the University of Texas; AB from Harvard University, magna cum laude. Email: hlangfur@buffalo.edu

 <https://arts-sciences.buffalo.edu/history/faculty/faculty-directory/langfur-hal.html>

Revista Maracanan. Please tell us about your academic background and how you relate your intellectual formation to contemporary US politics.

Hal Langfur. As a traveler and journalist, I first came to Brazil in the mid-1980s. Based in Rio de Janeiro but also reporting from around the country, I covered news and features for several English-language print and radio outlets, witnessing Brazil's inspiring return to democracy. This work occurred while my own government was pursuing deeply anti-democratic policies across Latin America. When I later enrolled at the University of Texas to seek a PhD, I focused on Brazil's Indigenous peoples and the colonization of the sertões in eighteenth-century Minas Gerais. Although my academic interests drew me to the colonial period, the responsibility to write sensitively about Brazil for a U.S. audience was never far from my mind. Our nations have a great deal to learn from each other, both in the commonalities and differences of our respective histories. In the present political environment, with democracy eroding in the United States and Donald Trump now threatening Brazil in support of his authoritarian ally, former president Jair Bolsonaro, this responsibility seems more urgent than ever. I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in this timely exchange with my colleagues and the editors of *Revista Maracanan*.

As a historian of Indigenous Brazil, comparative frontiers and borderlands, race relations, and cultures of violence, I have dedicated my research to understanding the diverse peoples who inhabited portions of the South American interior that Portugal sought to colonize but failed to control. I have pursued this objective by connecting realms often considered separately and even antithetically: the South Atlantic colonial system and the myriad frontier regions that formed along its perimeter; the African diaspora and the world of non-sedentary Native peoples; elite information brokers and nonliterate backcountry informants. My first book, *The Forbidden Lands: Colonial Identity, Frontier Violence, and the Persistence of Brazil's Eastern Indians, 1750-1830* (Stanford University Press, 2006), examined the bloody conflict between colonists and Native peoples in the eastern forests of Minas Gerais. I argued that frontier violence was a defining feature of Brazil's transition from colony to independent nation, which placed Brazil firmly within broader, hemispheric processes of internal colonization. Subsequently, I edited a collection of essays, *Native Brazil: Beyond the Convert and the Cannibal: 1500-1900* (University of New Mexico Press, 2014). This volume brought together the work of historians and anthropologists based both in Brazil and the U.S. Together, we sought to expose English-language readers to flourishing contemporary scholarship on Brazilian Indigenous history. My most recent book is *Adrift on an Inland Sea: Misinformation and the Limits of Empire in the Brazilian Backlands* (Stanford University Press, 2023). In this study, I resume my exploration of the internal colonization of southeastern Brazil

during the final decades of Portuguese rule. The book shows how the official objective to territorialize Portuguese sovereignty was often held in check by Native peoples, fugitive slaves, and the itinerant poor, as well as certain elite vassals. Many of these individuals were far more knowledgeable about the interior than the Portuguese Crown, which allowed them to elude, defy, and reshape imperial ambitions.

As a colonial historian, now distant from my days as a journalist, I am unaccustomed to writing about contemporary affairs. In my teaching, however, I have always sought to link the past with the present. These connections must be drawn judiciously, taking account of historical contexts and giving as much consideration to contrasts as comparisons. Yet persistent characteristics of the human condition make all too obvious the relationship between my research, teaching, and the themes of this present discussion about the Trump administration's disruptive interference in our higher education system. In the past, no less than the present, the rich and powerful sought ever-greater wealth and control, the excluded pressed for a fairer share and better treatment, groups with opposing beliefs clashed, bias and misinformation impeded mutual understanding, and sometimes, when circumstances were just right, persecution yielded to justice and greater equality. The past reminds us that while the forces of repression may evolve, so too does the determination to challenge them. In moments like these, the historian's work must not be confined to the archive.

Revista Maracanan. The Donald Trump administration has taken a series of interventionist actions in American universities; among the best known are those that occurred at Columbia and Harvard. Around April 15th, 2025, Trump froze approximately USD 2 billion of Harvard's funds. Furthermore, he threatened to withdraw Harvard's tax exemptions, arguing that elite universities act in favor of terrorists and against the public interest. According to a letter sent to Harvard and published by *The New York Times*, the university had not fulfilled the "conditions of intellectual and civil rights". And today, June 30th, 2025, the White House has determined that Harvard violated civil rights laws, as reported by *The New York Times*. How do you perceive Trump's actions and the symbolism of the attack on this university?

Hal Langfur. The Trump administration's decision to freeze federal funding to Harvard University, later overturned by a federal judge, stands as the most dramatic instance to date of its campaign against institutions of higher learning. Targeting the oldest and wealthiest university in the United States, the action was accompanied by parallel if not identical moves against other private and public academic institutions. The administration alleges civil rights violations and antisemitism among its accusations against Harvard, Columbia, the University of Virginia, the University of California, and others. It justifies its punitive measures in legal terms, but Trump has made no effort to conceal the political purpose of correcting what many on the right perceive as a leftist ideological tilt in American higher education.

Both as a faculty member at a large public research university and as a historian of Brazil, I find this federal intrusion deeply troubling. It evokes episodes in the history of both nations in which authoritarians sought to control universities considered sources of opposition to their rule. Leaders targeted educational institutions not only to force pedagogical changes but also to whip up ideological divisions, advancing populist and autocratic agendas. As dire as this latest assault on higher education may be, it is far from the first. More frequently than we may wish to acknowledge, both of our governments have taken aim at university administrators, faculty, and students as part of broader efforts at political repression and social engineering. Educators and students in both countries have often found themselves at the center of broader struggles over democracy, national identity, and state power.

The readers of this journal will be familiar with attempts to bring universities under tighter state control during Getúlio Vargas's *Estado Novo*. The post-1964 military dictatorship's persecution of professors and students, widespread censorship, and severe restrictions on university autonomy will also come to mind. More recently, the Bolsonaro administration's delegitimization of scientific and other forms of academic expertise, its denunciation of universities for alleged leftist brainwashing, and its use of deliberately destabilizing budget cuts all point to the eerily parallel trajectories of the two countries.

In the U.S., current anti-academic, anti-intellectual policies likewise have their precursors. As the Cold War intensified in the 1940s and 1950s, universities became targets of anti-communist purges. Congressional hearings pressured universities to fire professors who refused to testify or name colleagues accused of communist sympathies. Widespread self-censorship and a chilling of academic inquiry resulted, especially in the humanities and social sciences. A direct line to the present can also be drawn from the relentless criticism in the 1980s by the Reagan administration, spurred on by conservative think tanks, which accused universities of abandoning Western values in favor of supposedly radical multiculturalism. In this century, following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Muslim students and faculty became subjects of increased federal surveillance. International scholars who espoused controversial views faced visa denials or deportation based on vaguely defined national security concerns.

While these historical precedents and comparisons help contextualize current developments, the Trump administration's choice of Harvard as a target is particularly significant. Beyond its wealth and national prestige, Harvard is also a global icon of the progressive academic tradition valuing humanistic inquiry, pluralism, critical debate, and fact-based solutions. Portraying Harvard as antagonistic to the public interest, the administration calculates it will enflame its supporters, particularly those suspicious of elite institutions of all kinds to which they have little or no access. Accordingly, Trump has sharpened a regressive narrative that casts our most selective universities as disconnected from national values, their faculties as enemies of the people or agents of foreign influence. Like so many demagogues before him, he anticipates substantial political gains from castigating intellectuals. More

unusually, he also demands large sums in the form of financial penalties, of the kind paid by Columbia, which his critics denounce as little more than extortion payments to shield universities from further punishment.

Revista Maracanan. Unlike Columbia University, Harvard became the first US university to reject the government's demands on April 14th, 2025, accusing the White House of trying to "control" the university community. What is your opinion on Harvard's leading role in the fight against Donald Trump's abuses, having refused to immediately accept the intervention of the current US president?

Hal Langfur. The Trump administration's justification for its attempted funding freeze, claiming violations of civil rights law, raises a range of concerns. These issues have been clearly articulated by Harvard president Alan Garber. The government accuses Harvard of failing to protect Jewish students from threatening antisemitic speech and campus protests following the Hamas attack on Israel and subsequent onset of the war in Gaza. Writing to the Harvard community in late-April after the university responded by filing a lawsuit against the administration for its actions, Garber acknowledged legitimate reasons to worry about rising antisemitism on campus, across the U.S., and throughout the world. He affirmed Harvard's commitment to fight antisemitism and all forms of hatred as a legal and moral imperative, and he pointed to concrete steps already taken to do so. But he decried the cancellation of billions in research funding and rejected the government's proposed remedies, including audits of academic programs, changes to administrative and hiring practices, surveillance of faculty and student viewpoints, and stricter controls on international student enrollment. He characterized these measures as illegal overreach and counter to Harvard's independent educational mission.

Having attended Harvard as an undergraduate, I was among the thousands of alumni who received Garber's communique. Like many others, I felt reassured by his decision to take a very public stand against Trump's attacks. He did not deny that the protection of civil rights is an essential function of government. Rather, he and other educators who have spoken out stress the selective and punitive application of federal civil rights laws as evidence of a political agenda showing little genuine concern for student welfare and academic excellence. In a cynical misreading of intent, Trump criticizes as discriminatory university policies designed to promote diversity. Repurposing laws intended to protect individuals from bias and bigotry, he seeks to consolidate power, silence dissent, and limit academic freedom. Harvard's refusal to play along signals a potentially pivotal act in defense of such independence, not least because of the institution's real and symbolic power.

In the form in which it first became public, Harvard's position seemed to stand in stark contrast to the approach taken by Columbia University, where pro-Palestinian protests

garnered sustained media attention, galvanizing dissent on campuses throughout the country. Faced with debilitating budget cuts after Trump took office, Columbia chose to negotiate. In exchange for the restoration of most of the USD 400 million in funding terminated by the government, the university agreed to pay a combined 221 million fine, although without acknowledging wrongdoing. One of the largest financial penalties ever imposed on a university in a civil rights case, the settlement resolves – at least for the time being - allegations that Columbia tolerated harms inflicted on its Jewish students, staff, and faculty. As part of this settlement, the university also accepted a modified version of government-mandated reforms to its Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies department and its Institute for Israel and Jewish Studies, and it promised to change admissions and hiring practices, including ending certain diversity initiatives and implementing more stringent vetting of international students.

Despite the different responses of these two private institutions, the gap between them may not turn out to be as wide as initial press reports suggested. Behind the scenes, Columbia has worked to protect itself from some of the most intrusive of Trump's demands, while Harvard has sought grounds for compromise even as it pursues its case in court, now facing a billion-dollar countersuit by the Trump administration. Both responses highlight the vexing choices institutions are being forced to make in the face of ideologically motivated government interference. Columbia's decision to acquiesce to Trump may have addressed urgent pragmatic concerns, preserving research funding and avoiding an expensive struggle in court, but it also raises questions about the long-term cost of compliance for the university's reputation and educational mission. Harvard's act of defiance, by contrast, reaffirmed the principle that universities must not compromise their core values even under severe outside pressure; yet, as the *New York Times* recently reported, university negotiators are weighing a financial settlement of more than twice the amount paid by Columbia to avoid a prolonged legal battle and maintain federal research funding. Whatever the differences between the two cases, both have put on display alarming adjustments forced on institutions of higher learning by the Trump administration's anti-intellectual, anti-pluralistic policies.

Revista Maracanan. How do you perceive the impact of the Trump administration's actions on the university where you teach and research, following the threats of government directives at two of the largest American universities (Columbia and Harvard)? Has there been a change in the atmosphere among professors? Have international students felt uncomfortable? Has the environment in the classrooms and on campus undergone profound changes?

Hal Langfur. Although less well publicized, the Trump administration's attempts to force universities to conform to its policies have implications far beyond elite institutions like

Harvard and Columbia. At public institutions such as the University at Buffalo (UB), where I teach and conduct research, the consequences may be less visible but they are no less significant. The atmosphere on campus has shifted. Faculty are more wary in and out of the classroom, international students more anxious on and off campus, and administrators more fearful of attracting federal scrutiny. A sense of institutional vulnerability is palpable.

Although UB has suffered far smaller federal cuts, some of which have been replaced by state funds, and although Democratic Party legislators who control New York State politics have pledged their support for the university, the intensifying rightwing antipathy for academia has raised deep concerns about the institution's ability to pursue its ambitious educational goals as a flagship research university of the State University of New York (SUNY) system. The logic of the federal intervention – framing universities as havens for ideological extremism, hostile to national values – can easily be extended to any institution that fosters critical inquiry or dissent. The deprecation of expertise, the unchecked spread of disinformation, and the rise of anti-affirmative action initiatives, along with budget-slashing measures adopted to fund federal tax cuts for the wealthy, have directly undermined faculty research, brought into question the viability of existing diversity and equity programs, and threatened tuition loans for needy students. Faculty discussions increasingly revolve around the possibility of stricter federal oversight, the politicization of research, and the potential consequences of noncompliance with government demands that run counter to the university's stated mission to foster excellence in research, scholarship, and creative activities, while promoting social justice.

International students have been particularly affected. At UB, long a leader among public universities in international enrollment, many of our students come from Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America. Some current students and recent graduates have had their visas revoked by the Trump administration, requiring them to leave the country. With immigration raids occurring in Buffalo as in other U.S. cities, many other students, as well as non-citizen faculty, have expressed concern about their visibility and status. The administration's suspicion of foreign affiliations and its callous anti-immigrant stance have created an atmosphere of corrosive uncertainty.

Public universities like UB face particular challenges in this environment. Unlike Harvard and Columbia, we do not have enormous endowments to soften the impact of federal funding cuts. Our reliance on government grants and contracts makes us highly susceptible to indirect forms of control. This financial exposure limits our ability to resist political pressure and raises unsettling questions about how to balance fiscal stability with the defense of academic principles.

Of course, major federal research funding tends to be concentrated in the sciences, medical fields, and engineering. As a consequence, public university leaders have focused distressingly little attention on the implications of Trump's policies for the humanities, social

sciences, and arts. Long before Trump came to power, faculty and students in these disciplines found themselves marginalized by administrators under pressure to attract research dollars and to prove the value of a university education, measured by a well-paying job after graduation. Already underfunded disciplines now face enormous pressure. These are often the same areas of study perceived by conservatives as ideologically problematic. Trump and his supporters have accused universities of being dominated by Marxists, social justice extremists, and anti-American ideologues. This rhetoric has the potential to be particularly chilling in fields that critically examine power, identity, and history.

The recent partial defunding of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), which allocates grants and fellowships to individual scholars, as well as to many museums, archives, and libraries, plunged non-profit arts and humanities organizations throughout the country into crisis and interrupted faculty research plans. The NEH placed more than half of its staff on administrative leave and revoked more than 1,000 grants it had already awarded. Slated for a complete shutdown in 2026, unless Congress alters Trump's spending proposal, the NEH has been directed to avoid supporting research and programs that "promote extreme ideologies based on race or gender". This demand effectively disqualified many projects previously deemed deserving of federal funding.

Apart from hoping that litigation favors Harvard and others suing the Trump administration for its actions, more than a little effort is required to find a positive note on which to end this grim overview. However, it does seem as though this tumultuous period in higher education has sparked renewed attention to the values, norms, and institutions under assault. In my own courses on Brazilian history, I have seen students become more interested in the rise of populist and authoritarian regimes, in social and political developments that threaten democracies, and in movements that promote civil liberties and greater equality. Examining the distant past and more recent times, students are drawing insights from our two nations' legacies of indigenous displacement, African slavery, racial capitalism, and white supremacy. For many, the recent parallels between the Trump and Bolsonaro presidencies are especially revealing. I draw hope from my students as they consider how this shared history can help us understand and respond to our challenging present predicament.