

Extremist Politics, the "Culture War" and the Annihilation of History


Modern day democracy: current
perspectives





What's old is new again

The culture wars and eliminationism



January 6th, 2021 was inevitable, and the road leading to it was long

- The storming of the US Capitol by Far-Right supporters of then-president Donald Trump is rooted in nearly 40 years of American conservative political strategy

The “culture wars”: fighting for the soul of America

- In the 1970s and 1980s, American conservatives rallied around
 - Abortion and “family values”
 - Sexual orientation
 - Immigration
 - Gun rights
 - Taxation and “government overreach”
 - Separation of church and state – Republicans once embraced secularism but abandoned it in favour of a sort of low-key Christian Dominionism



In the 21st Century, the culture wars have taken center stage once again

- Progressive agendas had a series of successes in the 80s and 90s. But the culture wars didn't end there, a new generation began to fight them in the 2000s.
 - Free speech v. censorship
 - Gender and gender identity
 - Transgender rights & “bathroom bills”
 - “Gamergate” – a dry-run for the alt-right and MAGA

**TRANS
RIGHTS
= ARE =
HUMAN
RIGHTS**

How can we understand the culture wars from a sociological perspective?

- We build our identities around our most deeply held values and beliefs
- We use those identities to build social networks that become our communities, which reinforce our identities and give us meaning
- When our society doesn't reflect our values, we can feel cut off from it.
 - We don't see ourselves reflected in the culture around us
 - We don't understand the signs and symbols of the culture
 - We feel anomie, a sense of dislocation that can cause anger, resentment, and despair.



Eliminationism

Turning opposing ideals into existential threats

What is “eliminationism?”

- It can be understood in a few different ways:
 - A reaction to perceived challenge or threat
 - A process of group identity building
- What makes eliminationist rhetoric or patterns of belief so dangerous is that it leaves very few options to address challenges. If you believe an idea, policy or person to be an existential threat to your way of life, anything short of extreme responses seem like half-measures.



Counter-memory and alternative history

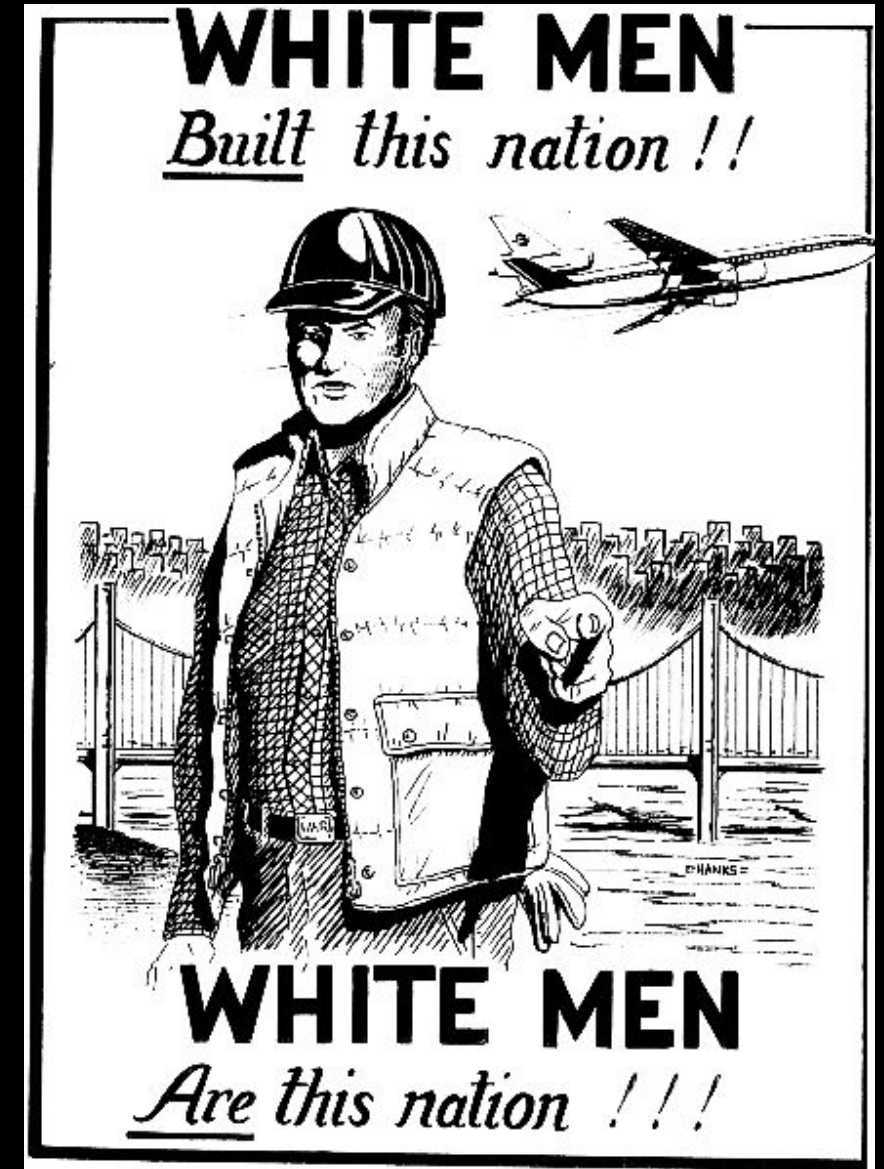
Weaponizing history in the service of politics


History, as a discipline isn't static

- I've found that people often confuse history with the passage of time. History is a story we tell to one another that attempts to make sense of the fragments of information we've uncovered about the past.
 - It changes as new information is uncovered
 - It changes as biases are revealed or addressed
- When historical facts change, or when our picture of the past grows clearer, we need to make a choice: continue to believe what we've always believed, or realign our beliefs with the new historical narrative

The more extreme our position, the more likely we are to let our beliefs influence our approach to facts and history


- We re-write history to better reflect our beliefs or our ideologies
 - For example: white supremacists arguing that virtually all human advancement is the result of white people inventing things
 - “White men built this nation; white men are this nation!”
- We refuse to shift our beliefs to accommodate new information
 - For example: new evidence indicates that early hunter-gatherer societies were quite egalitarian, but many people still like to believe that only men hunted, and only women gathered





Extremist groups deliberately distort history to further their agendas

- Established history becomes “propaganda” or “liberal indoctrination” while movement reinterpretations of history become “real history.”
- This allows extremist groups to reposition themselves as heroes or the true defenders of cultural legacies or traditions
- We can call this “counter-memory:” a way of re-remembering the past that relies on the reinterpretation of events and ideas

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The rest of us
aren't immune
from this either

- When we refuse to acknowledge histories that make us uncomfortable.
- When we argue that school curricula ought to “avoid politics or controversy” when teaching subjects like history, biology, or literature.
- When we argue that changes to public education that introduce new ideas or concepts are “following an agenda” or “bringing politics into education” while failing to acknowledge that keeping those ideas out amounts to the same thing.

Counter-memory, eliminationism, and bullshit

How to annihilate truth and history in contemporary democracies

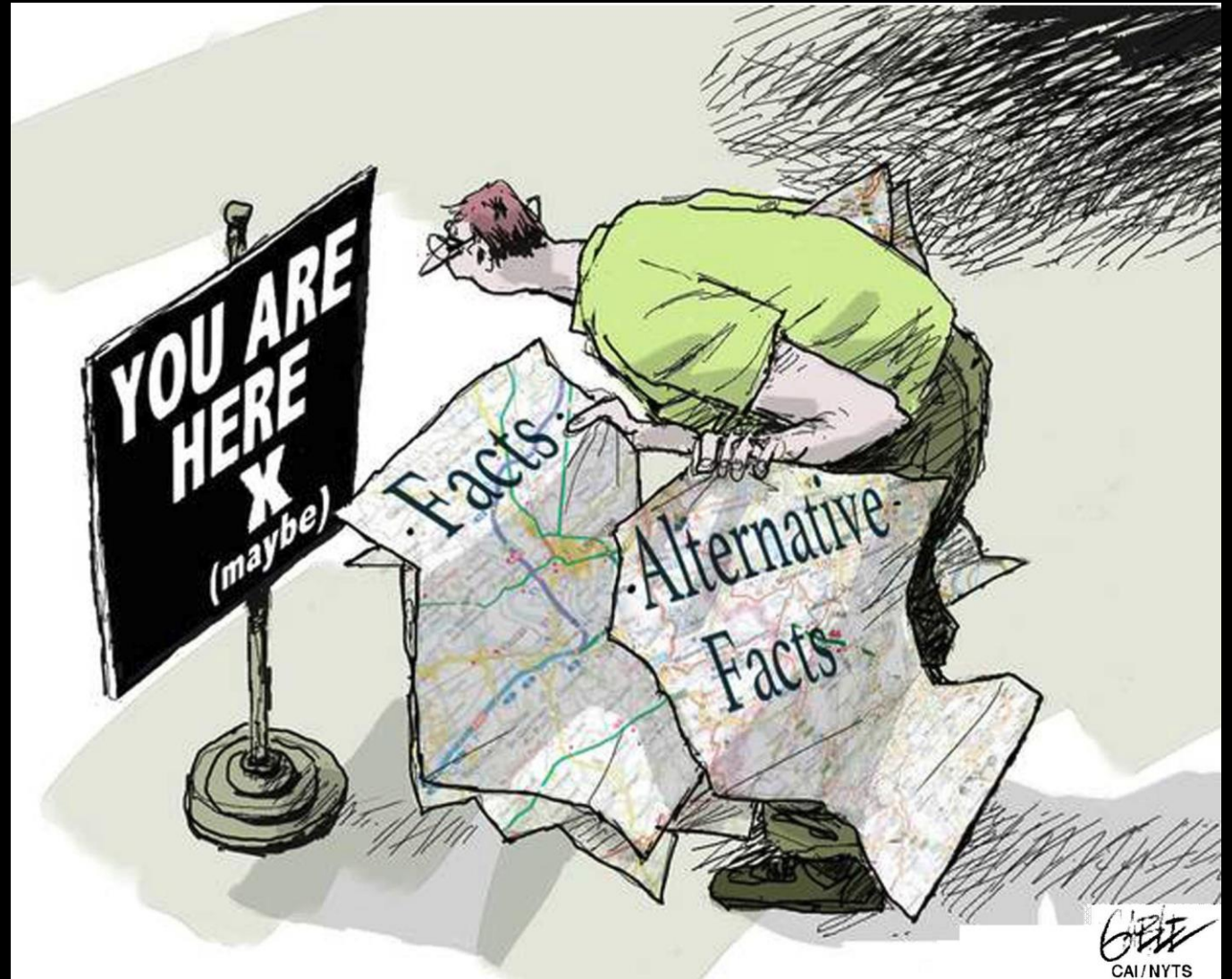


There is a final element of this issue we need to discuss: bullshit

- Harry Frankfurt, in his philosophical essay “On Bullshit” lays out three kinds of people (or more accurately, three approaches to truth):
 - Truth-tellers
 - Liars
 - Bullshitters (or bullshit artists)
- These people and positions reflect what Frankfurt calls our “relationship to truth” which is foundational to our approach to knowledge.
- Without an acknowledgement of truth, knowledge becomes nothing more than a matter of opinion, and that’s *dangerous*.

History relies on a recognition of—and support for—the truth

- So what happens when our support of the truth collapses and we're left with a sea of competing opinions on what history—and truth—“really is?”



This

- A space where traitors can call themselves “patriots” and finding out the truth of what happened can be buried by the very politicians who were present—and targeted—during the attacks.
- By destroying trust in evidence, in facts, in knowledge itself, extremists can re-write their own histories and that of their struggle.



Questions? Discussion?