21st-century United States: A Historical Assessment

International Conference
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Université Paris Cité, Paris, France

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In 1941, Henry Luce referred to the 20th century as "the American century," highlighting the United States' emergence as a global superpower and providing a celebratory concept that embodied both national narratives and international perceptions of U.S. influence.[1] By contrast, the 21st century seems to have been shaped by a series of crises challenging the prosperity and stability of the U.S.: the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the subprime mortgage crisis and the Great Recession it ushered in, the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as violent institutional and political crises, perhaps best exemplified by the January 6, 2021 storming of the Capitol by election deniers. Is the notion of "crisis" still relevant at a time when crises have become increasingly normalized in popular and media discourse, to the point that the state of crisis almost seems permanent? How can we better understand the first quarter of the 21st century from a critical perspective, and what vocabulary should we adopt to better characterize it?

A few months before the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, this international conference is intended to spark a scholarly conversation about the first twenty-five years of the 21st century in the United States. Beyond a retrospective review of the past twenty-five years, this conference will explore ways of periodizing the recent past by identifying patterns, trends, paradigm shifts, or, conversely, by highlighting continuities with previous centuries. This attempt to write a history of the present will draw on the epistemologies and methodologies of the humanities and social sciences.

[1] Henry Luce, "The American Century," *Life Magazine*, February 17, 1941, 64.

Reflecting on the 21st century in the United States, researchers might question the notion of "progress," a key concept in U.S. history and ideology, and compare it with declension narratives–of economic, climatic, demographic decline–that undergird critical theoretical frameworks ranging from Afro-pessimism to collapsology or conservative ideologies. Papers could, for instance, analyze the cyclical or linear visions of the present that underpin political narratives, media and cultural representations, as well as academic writings, which often describe political polarization and the unequal distribution of wealth in the country as "increasing." In a similar vein, papers could explore the relevance of the concept of "backlash," which is sometimes criticized for its framing of history and the emphasis it places on causation.

When does a historical period begin and when does it end? We encourage papers to look back at key events of the past twenty-five years and consider how they may constitute salient chronological milestones delineating the period; 9/11, for instance, during which the American people witnessed the literal collapse of a symbol of capitalism and prosperity, is an event often described as having thrust the country into the 21st century.

Scholars could also reflect on the changes brought about by the development of the Internet and the creation of the first social networks, the consequences of Hurricane Katrina, and mass murders such as the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. Papers could explore the relevance of framing these events as "turning points" and "watershed moments."

How does common and scholarly language conceptualize and materialize time periods in the 21st century, and what are the consequences of such framings? The goal of the conference will ultimately be to consider the possibilities and limits of circumscribing time periods by examining how doing so might simplify, generalize, and amalgamate trends while highlighting salient markers of change. Papers could explore the notions of "revolutions" (digital, political, or social mobilizations, for example), "crises" or "disasters" (whether climatic, diplomatic, or public-health related) to suggest new historiographical framings for the period.

Discussions will thus allow for epistemological reflections on the ways in which (sub)periods can be defined and designated, notably through the sequencing of decades. Have chrononyms such as "Roaring Twenties" or "postwar period," used to conceptualize the 20th century, already been invented for the 21st? The nicknames coined for the 2000s ("the aughts," "the noughties") remain rarely used, whereas "Y2K" is much more established in everyday language to designate the year 2000 and the anxieties it generated around technological dysfunction. Temporal prefixes are often used to designate the consequences of the attacks of September 11, 2001, or of the COVID-19 pandemic: papers could therefore focus on characterizing the "pre-9/11" or "post-COVID" periods. Media and scientific discourse sometimes refer to the "post-truth era" to describe the prominence of conspiracy theories in US society and the crisis of

“traditional” media; the conference will provide an opportunity for collective reflection on the relevance of such qualification. Similarly, researchers could examine some of the defining symbols of this first quarter-century: why and how do images, words, slogans, and gestures become emblematic of a historical period or trend, which then becomes both represented and signified by its symbols, such as with Colin Kaepernick’s kneeling protest and Trump’s “Make America Great Again” caps?

The question of how “generations” are conceptualized and labeled could also be a focus of scholarly reflection. Different age groups are often referred to in the media, on social networks, and sometimes in academic discourse, as “Millennials,” “Gen Y,” or “Gen Z.” Do these divisions make sense from a sociological perspective? We encourage scholars to approach these categorizations from a critical outlook. Historians could also help contextualize contemporary developments within longer traditions: for example, to what extent is the Black Lives Matter movement a continuation or departure from Black liberation movements of previous centuries? Outside of academic scholarship, how have 21st-century activists generated historiographical discourses to fuel their political agendas? Drawing on debates on the periodization of the Civil Rights movement, papers could question the chronological delimitation of major social movements of the past twenty-five years. The events and movements that have defined the early 21st century—the rise of Black Lives Matter, Occupy Wall Street protests, the #MeToo movement, environmentalist activism, massive strikes like those led in the automotive industry in 2023, the creation of March 4 Our Lives after the 2018 Parkland high school shooting, the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, the Dakota Access Pipeline protests at Standing Rock in 2016, to name a few—can all be considered as moments of break and/or continuity when situated within the traditions from which these movements draw—with their own specificities. These reflections may also address the epistemological and methodological issues involved in writing history as it unfolds.

Papers might additionally question the relevance of comparisons between the current period and earlier ones. For example, historian Ariela Gross refers to the post-2016 period as a “Second Redemption,” echoing the use of the term “Second Reconstruction” by scholars of the Civil Rights Movement as well as historian Joseph Peniel’s reference to the Obama presidency and the Black Lives Matter movement as a “Third Reconstruction.” Some authors also speak of a new “Gilded Age” to describe the extent of social inequality in American society today. Such parallels between historical periods are not confined to academic circles: as the 2016 campaign was unfolding, some protesters at anti-Trump rallies held signs reading “1933.” As protests broke out on university campuses in response to the Israeli war against Palestinians in Gaza, many commentators and historians drew comparisons with the anti-Vietnam War movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Conversely, the frequent use of the expression “unprecedented” by public authorities and journalists to describe the COVID-19 pandemic seems symptomatic of the regime

of presentism theorized by François Hartog, who argues that contemporary societies are obsessed with the present, framing every event as history-making.

Scholars of U.S. politics might also question whether it is relevant to follow the divide provided by presidential terms when analyzing recent history and suggest other chronologies around the Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden presidencies. What kinds of historical narratives do we produce when we adopt elections as chronological milestones to periodize time, and what are the limits of their analytical power? Should the influence of the Tea Party on the Republican Party, and the latter's evolution in recent years, for example, be studied through other chronologies?

In the field of economics, the rise of the gig economy and its impact on the labor market highlight significant transformations linked to technological and digital sectors. Should scholars, in light of these changes, follow historians N. D. B. Connolly and Kim Phillips-Fein in reconsidering the relevance of broad historical frameworks such as "late-stage capitalism" or "neoliberalism?"

Papers submitted for this conference could focus on different levels of analysis. Studies at the state level, for example, could shed light on national trends and provide additional nuance to existing frameworks. The local level, in addition to embodying broader phenomena and contextualizing significant events, allows for fine-grained analysis of empirical realities that sometimes run counter to generalizing or homogenizing narratives.

Submission format and timeline

Papers may be submitted in English or French. Proposals not exceeding 500 words should be accompanied by a short biographical note and be sent to **conference21US@gmail.com** by March 1, 2025. The Scientific Committee will provide a response by April 15.