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Moral Panic, childhood and present time in United States

Interview with

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UDESC UNIVERSIDADE DO ESTADO DE SANTA CATARINA
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PPGH Programa de Pós-Graduação em História

Paul M. Renfro is an adjunct professor in the Department of History at Florida State University (FSU), working at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Doctor in History from the University of Iowa (2016), in which he was awarded the Louis Pelzer Dissertation Fellow, Renfro developed a postdoctoral internship at the Center for Presidential History at Southen Methodist University. A specialist in the political and cultural history of the United States in the 20th and 21st centuries, he is dedicated to topics such as gender/sexuality, childhood and youth, family, the prison system and political cultures. Discussions about the History of the Present Time in the United States have recently turned, especially through the discussions on "Stories Lived", and LGBTQIAP+ historiography.

Among his vast published bibliography, the work Stranger Danger: Family Values, Childhood and the American Carceral State (Oxford University Press, 2020) stands out, the result of his doctoral thesis. In the book, Renfro analyzes the installation of a moral panic focused on the abduction and exploitation of children in the United States from the 1970s onwards, seeking to demonstrate how this sense of national proportions, fueled by parents, politicians and the media, generated the development of punitive laws, programs and practices designed to protect children from "dangerous strangers". Discussing how this discourse and national movement impacted American society at the end of the 20th century, the research developed in the book and in subsequent articles centralizes the discourses on childhood as part of the political and national constitution in the present time. This perspective has been addressed by the author in other publications, such as the collection Growing Up America: Youth and Politics since 1945 (University of George Press, 2019), in which he seeks to analyze the different meanings attributed to the notions of "childhood" and "youth" in American political history.

The following interview was conducted with Prof. Dr. Paul M. Renfro virtually between December 2021 and February 2022, during my period as a Visiting Scholar at the Department of Modern Languages and Literature at the University of Miami. Over the following pages, the historian discusses his research trajectory, the historicity of the concept of "moral panic" associated with

childhoods in the USA and the importance of intersectionality for studies on childhood and youth in the present time.

Tempo & Argumento*: Could you tell us about your research trajectory?*

Paul M. Renfro: I've long been interested in the recent political history of the United States. Throughout college and in my early years of graduate school, I became increasingly cognizant of the role of whiteness and fear in shaping American political culture. So when I began developing the research questions that would guide my dissertation project, I initially concentrated on white, middle-class responses to the African American civil rights movement and the convulsions of the 1960s and 1970s. Eventually, I focused more narrowly on the 1980s and 1990s "stranger danger" panic.

At the time (the early 2010s), US historians were producing a tremendous amount of scholarship on the "New Right," so that helped determine my research trajectory. Yet as I undertook primary source research and consumed new scholarship in political history and carceral studies, I gradually eschewed the "conservative ascendency" framework and began to stress the continuities between liberalism and conservatism in the latter half of the twentieth century. That approach shaped my first book project, and it continues to guide my research and teaching.

My next book focuses on Ryan White, a young white hemophiliac who contracted HIV in the 1980s and eventually died of AIDS-related causes in 1990. Given the stigmas attached to HIV/AIDS, Ryan's story enabled conservatives and liberals alike to show their interest in addressing the AIDS crisis without aligning too closely with gay men, people who used intravenous drugs, or other populations with which the illness was associated.

This theme of political continuity runs through my teaching, as well. I'm currently teaching the US since 2000, which concentrates on the affinities between Republicans and Democrats in the post-9/11 era, and America in the 1980s, which reveals similar affinities between Reaganism and Clintonism.

Tempo & Argumento*: In your most recent research, you have used the notion of "Stranger Danger" to refer to the national panic over child safety caused by the disappearance of children in the United States since the 1970s. How was the moral panic created and circulated in the country? Does a "moral panic" about childhood permeate the country's daily life?*

Paul M. Renfro: A slew of high-profile cases of missing or slain children ignited a moral panic concerning child safety and criminal depravity in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Activists, journalists, politicians, law enforcement officials, and others insisted that 50,000 children (if not more) were abducted by strangers in the United States annually. The actual figure was (and remains) somewhere around 100, and children are far more likely to be kidnapped, exploited, abused, and/or killed by family members and acquaintances. Nevertheless, the "stranger danger" panic enveloped the United States in the 1980s, 1990s, and into the twenty-first century.

In certain ways, the late twentieth-century moral panic concerning "stranger danger" and child exploitation never really dissipated. It continues to reveal itself in the QAnon phenomenon; in countless "true crime" podcasts and TV series; and in the "sex offense legal regime" that remains firmly entrenched in the US. Less obviously, perhaps, new scares concerning critical race theory and masking in schools also demonstrate how notions of childhood "innocence" and frailty shape US political culture in the twenty-first century.

Tempo & Argumento*: What are the major historiographical and methodological challenges in working with cases of missing children? Especially in the case of sources, these are permeated by various institutional discourses or media views, how have you faced this challenge?*

Paul M. Renfro: Although there's a robust and growing literature on childhood in the United States, until recently, historians hadn't really written much about the politics of childhood and youth in the late twentieth-century US. As your question indicates, part of that gap can be attributed to a lack of sources, but it might also reflect the general idea that children are "apolitical" or not particularly worthy historical subjects. As I worked on *Stranger Danger*, I concentrated on the ways in which adults

conceived of childhood in a moment of national uncertainty. How was childhood racialized, classed, and gendered, and how did various actors marshal particular understandings of childhood to achieve various political objectives? I also found some children's voices in televised news stories and newspaper accounts. Their testimonies often spoke to the fears that governed their lives.

Some of my other work has looked to fill various gaps in the literature on childhood and youth. Most notably, perhaps, I coedited a book called *Growing Up America*—published by the University of Georgia Press in 2019—which showcases histories of childhood and youth in the post-World War II United States.

Tempo & Argumento*: One of the great arguments of their research is that the increase in panic about the safety of children has led to the creation of punitive laws, programs and practices that have changed part of the prison system in the United States. What would be the main modifications and projects created in this regard?*

Paul M. Renfro: Almost all of the changes I detail in the book took place on the federal level. Several went into effect during the Reagan administration, but the most significant legal changes were implemented during and after the Clinton years. Reagan signed various laws heightening the civil and criminal penalties for child abuse and exploitation—namely the Child Protection Act of 1984, the Child Sexual Abuse and Pornography Act and Child Abuse Victims' Rights Act (both in 1986), and the 1988 Child Protection and Obscenity Enforcement Act. His successor, George H. W. Bush, signed the Child Protection Restoration and Penalties Enhancement Act in 1990.

During the Clinton administration, several major "memorial laws" laid the groundwork for the "sex offense legal regime" that remains in place in the US. These laws were named for various young, white, photogenic children who fell victim to stranger kidnapping, exploitation, and occasionally murder. Tucked within the infamous 1994 crime bill, the Jacob Wetterling Act—which honored an eleven-year-old sexual assault and murder victim—mandated the nationwide adoption of sex offense registries. Two years later, Clinton signed the federal version of Megan's Law, named for seven-year-old rape and murder victim Megan

Kanka, which "require[d] the release of relevant information to protect the public from sexually violent offenders." With the explosion of the Internet, the Department of Justice under both Clinton and George W. Bush also took major steps to prevent the exploitation of children online.

The Bush years witnessed the passage of the 2003 PROTECT Act and the 2006 Adam Walsh Act, the latter of which honored the slain six-year-old son of *America's Most Wanted* host John Walsh. Such measures—as well as those implemented on the state and local levels—have resulted in a registration and community notification regime that ensnares nearly 1 million Americans, many of whom have been subjected to social death and, oftentimes, homelessness.

Tempo & Argumento*: Still on the relationship between childhood and the prison system, how did these new laws and programs try to develop an idea of "family values"? So, the representation of a family started to be associated with childhood risks and, mainly, what format and type of family would this be?*

Paul M. Renfro: First and foremost, the concerns about "stranger danger" that proliferated in the late 1970s and 1980s grew out of larger anxieties about the sanctity and stability of the American family. Against the backdrop of gay liberation, women's liberation, and other freedom movements, conservatives and liberals alike insisted that the idealized (white) heteropatriarchal family was in danger. The highly publicized stranger abductions of Etan Patz, Adam Walsh, the Iowa paperboys (Johnny Gosch and Eugene Wade Martin), and Kevin Collins seemed to confirm pervasive fears about the romanticized family and the threats ostensibly facing it. Many commentators believed that fortifying the nuclear family could help deter child kidnapping and exploitation, even though children are far more likely to be victimized by family members and acquaintances than "strangers." The expansive sex offense registry that sits at the heart of the child safety regime also obscures the threats that lurk within the idealized family home.

Tempo & Argumento*: More recently, you have sought to analyze the issue of youth in the United States from an intersectional perspective. His current research addresses the case of Ryan White, a young man who was expelled from his school in the 1980s for being a carrier of the HIV virus. Could you tell us a little about the challenges of working with childhoods not only from an intersectional point of view, but also in cases of sensitive issues?*

Paul M. Renfro: Given the fact that children are in many ways a minoritized group—in that they are denied agency and autonomy—it can be difficult to recover children's voices in the archive. But by focusing on the politics and cultures of childhood—that is, the norms, expectations, and meanings associated with and assigned to children—I can determine how children and youth operated in a particular context and how adults deployed the image and rhetoric of childhood for various purposes.

Tempo & Argumento*: In addition to your research in the history of the present time, you have also taught on a recurring basis "The History of Your Life" at Florida State University. What is the general proposal of this discipline and what is the students' reception to this discussion?*

Paul M. Renfro: The class looks at the political culture of the United States since the year 2000. Obviously, the content changes every time I teach it, but we always move in rough chronological order, beginning with the contested 2000 election, 9/11, and the global war on terror. This semester (Spring 2022), we'll end with the January 6 insurrection and the Biden administration thus far. Because most of my students were born around the year 2000, they don't remember many of the historical events and processes that we cover in the course, and they didn't really learn this content in their high school history classes. So, they seem to get a lot out of the course, especially in the sense that it encourages them to think historically and critically about current events.

Tempo & Argumento*: Regarding the history of the present time that permeates your research and teaching practice, how do you see the potential of your research to rethink the time lived and, especially, policies for childhood?*

Paul M. Renfro: That's up to policymakers! But I think *Stranger Danger* clearly demonstrates that the child safety regime hasn't worked for families, children, or anybody, for that matter. Policymakers should empower young people to be more independent and adventurous while protecting them (and everybody) from harm and misery of all kinds (hunger, poverty, violence, etc.) both within and outside homes, schools, churches, etc.