

THE 35TH ANNUAL DAVIS, MARKERT, NICKERSON LECTURE
ON ACADEMIC AND INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM.

RUTH BEN-GHIAT

INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM IN AN
AUTHORITARIAN AGE

WITH RESPONSES BY
KARIMA BENNOUNE
JI YEON HONG
RONALD SUNY

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Disobedience
Press

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Published by Disobedience Press, an imprint of Michigan
Publishing Services, Ann Arbor.

disobediencepress.com

ISBN 978-1-964098-15-9

Ebook ISBN 978-1-964098-16-6

Book and cover design by Rebekah Modrak

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INTRODUCTION AND CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

DEREK PETERSON

The Davis, Markert, Nickerson Academic Freedom Lecture honors three colleagues, Dr. Chandler Davis, Clement Markert, and Mark Nickerson, who were drummed out of university service in 1954. They had refused to give testimony to the U.S. House Committee on Un-American Activities, which was then investigating communism on American university campuses.

President Hatcher's report into this unhappy affair is on the Faculty Senate's website, and it makes for interesting reading if you're into this sort of thing. President Hatcher proclaimed that the university would not knowingly employ communists on its staff and assured the House Committee investigating the matter that "we fully share the interests of our citizens in guarding, preserving, and enhancing our American heritage." Doctors Davis, Markert, and Nickerson were

sacrificed at the altar of political expediency and dismissed from their posts.

In the wake of these events, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) sanctioned the University of Michigan for its bad faith toward its faculty. In 1958, the university put in place Regents Bylaw 5.09, which laid out the procedures by which tenured members of the faculty can be dismissed from university service. Today, Regent's Bylaw 5.09 and its protections are the very peg on which our tenure here at the University of Michigan hangs.

What would Chandler Davis make of the University of Michigan today? We're confronting a new form of McCarthyism in our own time, as over the past two years, a new generation of demagogues in Congress has opened investigations into what they call antisemitism on campuses. Earlier this year, the AAUP and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) issued an excellent report describing the weaponizing of Title VI in U.S. higher education. The report shows that across American academia, investigations into antisemitism have ballooned to an all-time high.

Pro-Israel and right-wing advocacy groups have driven this surge of antisemitism investigations. At least 78 percent of the investigations analyzed in the AFT/AAUP report were launched in response to complaints made by one or the other of such organized groups.

Here at Michigan, our administration has shown a commendable willingness to stand up to some forms of conservative demagoguery. Earlier this year, two members of the faculty here at U-M published uncomplimentary comments about the murdered activist Charlie Kirk. There was a firestorm of outrage in conservative media. Thankfully, President Grasso and the Regents stood firm against calls in conservative media for the dismissal of our colleagues from the faculty. For that, we in faculty government, and I'm sure all of us in the faculty, are very grateful.

About pro-Palestinian activism, though, the administration has shown itself willing to bend to some of the demands that the demagogues who are manipulating Title VI have made. As chair of the Faculty Senate, I've repeatedly expressed our collective unhappiness about the ill-considered

and hasty modifications which were made last year to the Statement of Student Rights and Responsibilities, which put in place a punitive process to police and control student activism. And I've expressed my conviction that the ongoing prosecution of pro-Palestinian students, eleven of them, under the revised SSRR is an embarrassment and a discredit to our institution. Yes, the student activists did transgress against some of the rules that the university uses to limit and constrain activists' behavior. But their infractions pale by comparison with the magnitude of the human injustice that's been done by Israel in Gaza. They are on the right side of history, and I hope that in some future time, we will have a lecture series named after them.

In 1990, the Senate Assembly chose to honor these heroes of the struggle for academic freedom by establishing the Davis, Markert, and Nickerson Lecture on Academic and Intellectual Freedom. This year, members of the committee put their heads together to identify a 2025 speaker that will illuminate our present condition: Dr. Ruth Ben-Ghiat.

Ruth Ben-Ghiat is Professor of History and Italian Studies at New York University and a Senior Fellow at the Charles F. Kettering Foundation. She writes about fascism, authoritarianism, propaganda, and democracy protection. At a time when many of us are keeping our heads down, Dr. Ben-Ghiat is an active and visible presence in public life, bringing her expertise and knowledge to bear on our current predicament. She appears frequently on CNN, MSNBC, PBS, and other networks. Her Substack, titled *Lucid*, has over 210,000 subscribers.

Her latest book, a *New York Times* bestseller, *Strongmen: Mussolini to the Present*, examines how illiberal leaders use corruption, violence, propaganda, and machismo to stay in power, and how resistance to them has unfolded over a century.

She is also a consultant for businesses, civil society organizations, and television and film productions, including Guillermo del Toro's Academy Award-winning 2022 movie *Pinocchio* and the 2024 Netflix docuseries *Hitler and the Nazis: Evil on Trial*.

Karima Bennoune is the Lewis M. Simes Professor of Law at the University of Michigan Law School. She has served as UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, as an expert for the International Criminal Court, and as a legal advisor for Amnesty International. She is the author of consequential work on gender apartheid in Afghanistan and Muslim fundamentalism.

Ji Yeon Hong is the Korea Foundation Professor of Korean Studies and an Associate Professor of Political Science in the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts at the University of Michigan. Her research focuses on the political economy of authoritarianism, with particular attention to East Asia. She is particularly interested in the legacy of the authoritarian past, the long-term impact of political violence, and the determinants of elite behavior and government policies under authoritarianism.

Ronald Suny is the William H Sewell, Jr Distinguished University Professor Emeritus of History in the College of Literature,

Science, and the Arts at the University of Michigan. He is a trailblazing researcher and teacher of Russian, Armenian, and Georgian history and political science. He is the founder of the Armenian Studies Program at the University of Michigan, and the author, most recently, of *Stalin, Passage to Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM IN AN AUTHORITARIAN AGE

RUTH BEN-GHIAT

Thank you, Faculty Senate Chair Peterson, Provost McCauley, Director McCarthy, the Lecture Committee, and the distinguished faculty panel, with whom I will discuss this presentation. I'm so honored to be delivering this year's Davis, Markert, and Nickerson Lecture. And certainly, this year, it feels very precious to have this event. I'm grateful that this lecture exists at a public university in particular.

Right now, an authoritarian state is taking shape in the United States at a pace normally seen after a coup. We have military in the streets of American cities, people rounded up by masked members of state security forces, as they're known in other countries, and disappeared into domestic and foreign prisons. Government agencies of the Republican Party have become personal tools of a leader who seems intent on consolidating power at home, engaging in a

kind of domestic forever war against civilians, and promoting the interests of his foreign autocrat allies. This same president is engaging in shakedowns of businesses, media outlets, and universities to create a climate of subordination, generate income, and transform society quickly by standardizing government talking points throughout society and silencing threatening information.

That's going to be a theme, this mix of noise and silence, and standardization, which the Nazis called coordination or synchronization, as did the Italian fascists. That I am speaking virtually today and not in Ann Arbor in person is one small outcome or data point of this larger process. I would like to remain in the United States as an on-site witness and chronicler of developments that I have studied for decades. My priority is to continue my efforts of civic education, even in an atmosphere of threats to physical safety, which I've lived with on and off now for a decade, as have others who saw what was coming in the United States and spoke out on behalf of democracy. So here I am on Zoom, imparting whatever

wisdom I can give about what authoritarians do to intellectual and academic freedom, why they do it, and the role of educational institutions in peaceful resistance efforts.

I'd like to start with this incident from October 2024, which previews many of the themes of the lecture. Authoritarians have always gone after education and systems. Educators and military academies are included in this, as authoritarians seek to change the political culture, indoctrinate new generations with their own worldview, and eradicate critical thinking.

As I wrote in my book, *Strongmen*, propaganda may seem to be all about noise, but silence and absence are equally important to its operation. Strongmen disappear people, and they also disappear knowledge that conflicts with their ideologies and goals. Far from being ivory towers closed off from society, educational institutions are often frontline targets of those who seek to destroy democracy. What happens on campus reflects, and often anticipates, transformations of society in an authoritarian direction.

And so it was at Annapolis, in the spring of 2024. The U.S. Naval Academy had contacted me about giving the Bancroft Lecture in the fall. The History Department of the Naval Academy sponsors the lecture, and my approved topic was “Militaries and Authoritarian Regimes, Coups, Corruption, and the Costs of Losing Democracy.” I was going to focus on Chile, where a military known for its democratic culture and loyalty to the Constitution became an instrument of state terror and stayed that way for seventeen years. I was also going to talk about the costs of corruption and incompetence on militaries, using the examples of Mussolini’s Italy in World War II, and the early months of Putin’s invasion of Ukraine.

The Bancroft Lecture is a nonpartisan event, and I was not going to cover American leaders and domestic politics. Even so, Republicans apparently decided that a lecture by me on this topic, so close to the election, simply could not happen. I should specify that I was known to MAGA. My op-ed on the small lies that prepared the ground for the big lie in CNN had been featured in Trump’s

lawsuit against CNN in 2022.¹ The same year, I gave interviews to the January 6th Committee. I'd also been part of amicus briefs, including one that went to the Supreme Court in 2024.

A coordinated campaign was cooked up that involved the Heritage Foundation, the *Daily Signal*, *The Washington Times*, and GOP members of Congress. The degree of coordination was very interesting to me as a historian of propaganda. The point was to pressure the Naval Academy to cancel the lecture. When I received the perhaps inevitable call from the leadership of the Naval Academy that the lecture would be postponed indefinitely (which was their way of cancelling), they mentioned the threat of Hatch Act prosecution. Now, the Hatch Act restricts government employees from engaging in openly political activities. I just remember thinking, "what does the Hatch Act have to do with any of this or with me?" A week later, the argument was spelled out in a congressional letter signed by seventeen Republicans, including Mike Waltz, Clay Higgins, Ronnie Jackson, and others. The letter depicted me as a partisan historian for

my past criticisms of Trump, and singled out what they called a “false claim,” that he had an authoritarian character.

And thus, my physical presence at the academy would politicize—that was their word—the Bancroft Lecture, and thus it would be a violation of the Hatch Act, even if I didn’t talk about Trump or U.S. politics during my talk. I was unacceptable as a person, regardless of what I might say at Annapolis. As someone who has long studied how authoritarians target people, as well as institutions, I found this very interesting—that a person can become toxic, regardless of what they say. I also found interesting the amount of effort expended on this just weeks before a very, very important election.

This episode reminds us that attacks on intellectual freedom are never just about ideas. At play here are two favorite autocratic games. One is bullying and the other is making an example, where one person is punished, or one institution is punished, to dissuade others. Now, MAGA likely already knew what plans they had for the military if Trump got elected, and punishing the

Naval Academy was a message they were sending to West Point and other academies, and to the military as a whole.

One law of authoritarian bullying is that when you cave to the bully, he always comes back for more. In fact, the leadership of the Naval Academy, along with top military officials and judge advocate generals, have since been purged. The military academies have seen their curriculums altered in line with the aims of suppressing diversity, social justice, the history of these things, and other democratic values.

This brings me to what I call *moral collapse*, which is a process of freeing people from the idea that they should tell the truth, attend to facts, and respect others as individuals with dignity and autonomy. We are living through moral collapse in America, and it is essential to the success of authoritarianism wherever it descends. When nothing is true, everything is possible, to quote the book by Peter Pomerantsev.²

We hear a lot about the authoritarians hollowing out institutions, making government agencies tools of the leader or the party. Yet this

is just the start. Autocracies also hollow out people so that they abandon their conscience and their belief in their own critical faculties. In their actions, they reinforce the state's suppression of solidarity and the rule of law. Ultimately, authoritarianism requires you not only to betray others, but also to betray yourself.

Hannah Arendt would have understood the tragic takeaway of a woman who lived through decades of communism in Albania. Don't trust yourself. Don't trust your own skin. Don't trust your own husband or wife. For authoritarianism to be durable as a system, even beyond the person currently in office, you have to have this shift in morals and values, which ultimately can lead to a kind of nihilism, a cynicism, an emptying out, including the value of upholding the truth.

You also have to emotionally recondition people and this, in communist systems, is called re-education: to create a climate conducive to people accepting lying, corruption, and violence as normal. This is why, in the Joe Biden years, Republican states started claiming that students who read about institutionalized racism and

slavery would have emotional distress, and that was a bad thing, and so those readings should be banned. Of course, what they were doing was taking away readings that might spark the conscience and be reminders of keeping alive the flame of recognizing injustice and wanting to do something about it in the world. All of that is dangerous for authoritarian stability. So the histories had to go, the readings had to go, the books had to go. And that's the silencing part of it.

Now, we're also seeing more noise, a very aggressive modeling by individuals of extremist values, a breaking of taboos. Right now, the United States government is really a kind of a laboratory for the liberation of Trump and his allies from ethical and professional norms that might constrain immoral and lawless behaviors.

We have the Secretary of Defense, Pete Hegseth, telling the military they are untied from the old rules of engagement. We have White House policy chief Stephen Miller telling law enforcement that they are unleashed. We have the U.S. government wrecking all compliance,

oversight, checks, and accountability. It's a kind of moral deregulation that is parallel to the end of controls on pollution, polluting, and all of that.

The rehabilitation of Hitler is part of this. Vice President Vance and Elon Musk have been working to drop the taboo on Nazi speech. Both have spoken in Germany on this subject. This is happening in the States, but it's obviously connected to a whole transnational global far-right effort. Why should there be a firewall against that speech, they say? When Vance spoke about this in Germany, he was echoing what the Nazis were doing a century ago. In my book, *Strongmen*, I write about how Adolf Hitler had speaking bans placed on him for his hate speech in the 1920s from different German states. The Nazi Party made various posters. In one, Hitler is presented with tape on his mouth—the only man in Germany who is not allowed to speak.

Then Elon Musk gives a Nazi salute at a Republican event and shows up in Germany to speak to the Alternative for Germany far-right conference, a party that has neo-Nazis in it. He tells them, “why should you feel guilty anymore

about the German past? That's old stuff. You don't need to feel guilty about Hitler anymore."

Of course, this is not new. Autocrats routinely rehabilitate the most lawless people, from their national histories. Xi Jinping in China has chosen, of all people, to rehabilitate Mao, the mass slaughterer of China.

In the U.S., this rehabilitation of a repressive past means that the regional authoritarian state in our history, the Jim Crow South, must also be made acceptable. This is not new, but this is now part of the culture of the Republican party.

Now we can consider how this applies to intellectual freedom. One reason that authoritarians go after intellectuals, the press, and academic freedom, is that they think big, they think long-term, and they know that you need a shift in the political culture in civil society to support the new values you wish to inculcate. Propaganda is not just about getting people to believe this or that lie, or even a big lie. It's about changing the way people think, feel, and view the world, and getting them to hear certain words and

have certain associations. It's also an emotional reconditioning, as I referred to before.

We're living through a massive effort of delegitimizing anybody who works with fact-based research protocols, such as prosecutors, lawyers, research scientists, academics, teachers, and librarians. Democratic models of pedagogy have to go and be replaced with fanaticism, ideology, facts, or, as Kellyanne Conway said years ago, alternative facts.³

Researchers, scientists, journalists, and academics in any field become threats just from following this fact-based protocol, and instead conspiracy theories proliferate. In such a system, you express loyalty to the regime, or to the state, by acquiescing to false versions of reality. You are asked to perform those lies in public. You saw how, after the 2020 election, performing election denial became a way of keeping your status within the party. The lies must be maintained, and so your status is determined by your skill at repeating the lies.

It's one reason that this administration now has over thirty people in high positions who were

on-air talent at Fox News. They are very good at this skill. Performing those lies in public is key, whether it's the big lies of the 2020 election, Jews controlling the world, etc.

Universities are prime hunting grounds for autocrats because they train the next generations of leaders, and elite formation is very important to autocrats. This is why they don't just change the curriculum—they change university structures, they change personnel. They don't only change the content of learning to reinforce their ideological agenda, but they seek to remake the purpose of education, and that's an important point. They remake higher education as a different kind of space, instead of a space of critical thinking, curiosity, even solidarity, where you respect each other in conversation and discussions. The higher education institution must become a place to perpetuate and fill people with authoritarian values. It must reward intolerance and conformism. You have informers there, so it's also a place of suspicion and hostility and uncertainty.

The purpose of education, the space of education, as well as the content of education, changes in an autocratic system. This is just an example from Fascist Italy: first, they pressured professors and students through bureaucratic means because almost all universities there were public. You had a loyalty oath. Then the next year you had a requirement to join the Fascist Party. And then you had to wear the black shirt sometimes.

In the Cold War era, a very important, and far-reaching revision of the educational system was undertaken in Chile under Pinochet, who seized power in a U.S.-backed coup. His government targeted universities for this kind of cultural cleansing. Tens of thousands of staff, students, and teachers were dismissed. Thousands were sent to prison. Philosophy and social science departments were closed because they were supposed to be incubators of Marxism. But you also had Chile as a laboratory of privatizations. Public universities were defunded and new private universities appeared, including ones funded by Opus Dei, which had an important role in economic policy in Chile.

You also had the junta replacing civilian rectors with military officials. You had to create the university as a place of uncertainty and suspicion. Faculty were encouraged to denounce each other, and a faculty member was a prosecutor. If you were found guilty, you were sent to prison and tortured. This combination of creating suspicion and hostility, and privatization and defunding has come into the 21st century and inspired many authoritarian states.

Then-Prime Minister Viktor Orbán used this menu in Hungary. He subtracted 16 percent from the educational budget over the last decade. He initially started out repressing pedagogy to do with LGBTQ populations and banning gender studies. Most recently, in 2023, he passed a vengeance law, as it's called by the opposition. It punishes teachers, staff, and students who participate in protest. This is classic because the more the autocrat feels vulnerable, the more they penalize. They become more creative in the way they try and get people not to protest in the first place. The most important thing about this vengeance law is that educational policy is now

under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Interior, which is in charge of law enforcement. That's a big move. In theory, this allows the state to monitor teachers' laptops and videotape their classrooms. As Orbán felt more vulnerable, and as there were more protests because of defunding, privatization, and firings of teachers, more repression followed.

I want to consider the role of protest originating from educational institutions within autocracies. When you look at resistance movements, young people and students—whether it's high school or colleges—have been very, very important. They're often the first people to start protesting. Autocrats know very well that universities can be incubators of protest, and we've already seen in our country, even during the Joe Biden years, how important student walkouts and protests have been against book bans and censorship.

I just want to mention for context that we are living through a global renaissance of nonviolent protest. It's absolutely incredible. There are record numbers of young people engaging in

protests, both in and out of universities. Since 2019, Chile, Belarus, the United States, Iran, China, Israel, Tunisia, and Poland—on and on and on—have experienced their biggest demonstrations in decades, or even in their entire histories. Each protest is unique, tied to national and local causes, but there is a kind of a collective desire for governance informed by ideals of social justice and respect.

In some dictatorships, we are seeing young people demand more freedom, autonomy, and respect. These are demands that cannot be satisfied within existing systems of rule. I think it's very significant that in 2022 in China, an experience of collective dehumanization—the lockdowns from COVID—sparked the biggest protest since Tiananmen Square. Seventy-nine universities across China had demonstrations and some form of protests. I think this is very significant, and it caught the Chinese regime totally by surprise. Regimes like this have no response to the demands of young people to be treated with dignity other than more surveillance and more repression.

In February, less than a month after the second Trump administration started, I wrote an essay for my Substack newsletter, *Lucid*, entitled “Out of the Chaos and Corruption, A Revelation and a Reckoning Will Come.”⁴ I wrote that the corruption, entitlement, and vendetta mentality of the Trump administration would be so extreme that the eyes of his followers would open, and over time they would come to see him differently and start to question their attachment to him. More and more people would come to see that the end goal was to allow the very few to profit at the expense of the many. We’re seeing that reckoning start, with numbers building at No Kings protests, the mobilization of community networks in areas of ICE occupation, and record voter turnouts for the elections we just had on November 4, 2025. Young people and students have not yet been present at these protests in large numbers, but they have been key in recent years in shifting our consciousness of genocide, international law, environmental plunder, and the cost of suppressing the truth.

I am the last person to underestimate the gravity of what we face, and I know that each victory can spark a cycle of repression. One of my maxims is, “Never underestimate the American people.” I truly believe that the United States has the potential to defeat this nascent autocracy, and come out of it with a stronger and more just democratic system. For that, we have to counter moral collapse with a work of moral renewal that starts from the ground up.

Education is key to that. As educators, we can model the values we want to see in the world, both for our students and for the public through civic communications that counter disinformation and establish bonds of solidarity. We all have something to contribute in that regard.

I thank you so much for having this lecture, which is an example for turning knowledge and the lessons of history to public good today, and protecting democracy and intellectual freedom in an authoritarian age. I’m very honored to be part of it. Thank you.

RESPONSE

KARIMA BENNOUNE

It's a real privilege to take part in this event, honoring the legacy of Professors Davis, Markert, and Nickerson, and to have the opportunity to comment on a truly erudite and timely lecture by Professor Ben-Ghiat. We've been asked, as you heard, to speak for 5 to 10 minutes on these topics, which is just enough time to get yourself into trouble.

I wanted to start by saying how grave it is indeed that our speaker cannot be with us in the room, and how much we look forward to a day when we can welcome her here. What I'd like to do quickly is to consider the issue of academic and intellectual freedom raised in her lecture under international human rights law, which is what I teach.

We don't often conceive of things that happen in the United States as human rights questions, and we should. I'm going to conclude with a couple of observations based on my own research

on opponents of extremism in other countries—including Algeria, the home country of my father, Mahfoud Bennoune. I think it's a critical moment for us to continue to try to work and think globally, despite the obstacles.

Let me start by saying that universities are inestimable spaces, the value of which, to any truly democratic society, cannot be overstated. It was Mahfoud Bennoune who grew up in a peasant village under colonial rule, and who ultimately went on to obtain his PhD here at the University of Michigan, who would admonish me in my youth about the importance of universities, and the fact that I should never take them for granted. It annoyed me at age nineteen, but he was absolutely right.

The organization Scholars at Risk has noted that institutions of higher education are “engines of knowledge production, discovery, innovation, skills development, cultural preservation, and national progress.”¹ They model democratic discourse and international cooperation, as well as the search for self-realization and moral truth.

This is, of course, why extremists in power are targeting universities. So let us remember that what happens here matters. We should all take seriously our obligation to ensure that this great institution and others can fulfill the essential roles outlined by Scholars at Risk. We can indeed be a bulwark against the moral collapse that Professor Ben-Ghiat talked about.

Now, as a professor of international human rights law, it's perhaps entirely unsurprising that, in my view, one of the most important jobs of U.S. universities today is to respect and to defend human rights within our institutions, in our society, and in the world around us—both through the rigorous intellectual and scientific work being done here and through the way we operate.

What happened to Professors Davis, Markert, and Nickerson is an example of a stark failure to fulfill this mission in the past that underscores the imperative to do better today. How are U.S. universities fulfilling these roles? Today, I would say the record is very mixed, though I don't have time to review it in full.

There certainly have been negative developments that were alluded to in the introduction, and I note that, in 2024, no less than nine UN human rights experts strongly criticized the way in which U.S. universities were treating protesters demonstrating against Israeli atrocities in the Middle East.² In fact, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to education came to the United States in May 2024, and looking at the treatment of student protesters, said that all the measures taken against them have inevitably created a climate of intimidation and a chilling effect on the whole academic community.^{3,4} I think that must be part of why we have not yet seen mass student mobilization against the policies of the Trump administration.

However, there have also been recent moments of profound courage in academia, and this echoes the optimistic note that Professor Ben-Ghiat ended with, including the rejection of the Trump administration's so-called Compact for Higher Education by a number of leading universities. That decision is absolutely crucial and must be replicated in this moment. The most

pressing need in the field of academic freedom is to defend the centrality of university autonomy, ensuring that decisions about matters such as admissions and curricula are made on academic, not on political, grounds.

The former U.N. Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, U.S. law professor David Kaye, wrote in a 2020 report on academic freedom that academics and their institutions globally face what he termed “social harassment and State repression.”⁵ He issued a stark warning concluding that “attacks on academic freedom corrode the pillars of democratic life, of scientific progress and of human development.” I think that is a warning we have to take very seriously. There are stark consequences indeed for violations in the areas that we are discussing today, and that Kaye was addressing.

I also wanted to remind us all that the United States and other countries have international legal obligations to respect academic freedom—a fact that may sound quite quaint in an environment where we are seeing an all-out assault on the rule

of law. But I do believe that the rule of law continues to be a value we have to defend, and it's absolutely central to guaranteeing academic and intellectual freedoms.

We have to rebuild something that we can no longer take for granted, as Professor Chetan Bhatt has explained.⁶ That is a centrist consensus on human rights. It is critically important that we work together, perhaps from different political perspectives, but with a commitment to certain values and institutions in this moment.

I also think we have to be humble, and we have to learn from the world around us. There is so much to be learned from those in other countries who have stood up to authoritarianism and extremism in various forms. I keep thinking that it is the moment to flip the script and have capacity-building workshops for Americans run by experts from countries like Afghanistan, Iran, and Hungary. This would help us understand the strategies we need to develop. Strategic thinking and action are vital right now.

I wrote a book over a decade ago about frontline opponents of extremism, interviewing

more than 300 people from more than 30 countries.⁷ I learned from them many of the things that Professor Ben-Ghiat stressed here today. The importance of vocal opposition, the importance of speaking out and using any power or platform that you have to defy extremism, and the need to do this as fast as possible before it metastasizes beyond the possibility of treatment.

My interest in this topic grew out of Algeria's own "dark decade" of the 1990s when fundamentalist groups waged war against the civilian population in an effort to take power. Of course, they began by targeting intellectuals. My father, who loved universities, was ultimately driven out of teaching at the University of Algiers, due to death threats. But, even then, he and so many of his colleagues refused to be silent and continued to publish inside the country and warn against extremism.

I learned from my research that the more people and institutions who speak out, like my father and his colleagues, the safer those who speak out will be. Even when you think it might be useless, speaking out is a powerful method

of empowering and emboldening other people. There is much to be gleaned from the words of the outspoken Algerian intellectuals of that time, though their context was totally different than ours.

One of modern Algeria's greatest writers, Tahar Djaout, was tragically assassinated in that period in 1993. I encourage everyone to read his last book, which was published posthumously. It's called *The Last Summer of Reason*. It is Algeria's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Djaout describes the rise of extremism in chilling detail, some of which will seem familiar to us now. He projected what his country would look like if the fundamentalists took over. Minds would be closed, families destroyed, and on and on. But the real story of the novel is none of that. The real story of the novel is that some refused to submit. To use Professor Ben-Ghiat's words, they refused to be "hollowed out."

The novel's hero, a man named Boualem Yekker—whose family name means "stood up" or "awoke" in the Tamazight language—is a free-thinking bookseller. I think it's no accident that

he was a bookseller. As Djaout described him, “Yekker was one of those who had decided to resist, those who had become aware that when the hordes confronting them had managed to spread their fear and impose silence they would have won.” This is the silence Professor Ben-Ghiat was talking about. Like Professors Davis, Markert, and Nickerson, we need to find the determination to defy, to be like Boualem Yekker, to stand up and to ensure that those seeking to spread fear and impose silence do not win.

RESPONSE

JI YEON HONG

I would emphasize what an honor this is to be able to speak in front of my great colleagues and with Professor Ben-Ghiat. I also graduated from NYU, so I'm very glad a professor from my alma mater is speaking for us today.

I'm here, not just as a political scientist, but to share a personal story, as a person who experienced different authoritarianism in East Asia. I was born and grew up in South Korea. When I was very young, it was a military dictatorship, and I grew up during the country's period of democratization.

As a scholar, I study authoritarianism in East Asia, mainly China and North Korea, but also the history of South Korea and Taiwan. Before joining the University of Michigan in 2022, I worked in Hong Kong for eight years, where there was a massive, but failed, pro-democracy movement.

Dictators in the 20th century often used mass violence, repression, and ideology to suppress

dissent, but those tactics have become very costly, especially in this digitized and global age. One video on social media can change the streets tomorrow. That's what happened in Nepal recently.

Autocrats have adapted and they maintain power today by managing how people perceive reality, how people see the world. They carefully stage elections. They manipulate statistics and flood the media with stories of their own success. Contemporary authoritarian leaders seek to appear competent, popular, and even legitimate, more legitimate than the democratically elected leaders.

In a recent 2019 article, Guriev and Treisman called this new model “informational authoritarianism.”¹ Unlike the brutal dictatorships in the last century that ruled through fear and violence, today's autocrats rely on controlling information, which Professor Ben-Ghiat described as propaganda and silencing.

What does this mean for academic freedom? I think in these informational autocracies, universities basically become a better ground

for what is true, what is science, what is reality. Regimes that depend on shaping beliefs have a strong incentive to control and deny the independent knowledge and thinking that we are doing.

Scholars who question official history, reveal corruption, and analyze inequality and threaten the regime's legitimacy are the biggest threats to the regime. The control is often subtle. Visa denials for foreign journalists and researchers, defunding scholarly investigations, and public attacks on academic works have been common in many authoritarian countries today.

In 2014, the year of the Umbrella Movement, I began my first job as an assistant professor in Hong Kong. That was a much smaller scale movement by students to persuade the Hong Kong government, but also the Chinese government, to have a fair election for the chief executive of the city. It failed, and then, 5 years later, it became a much bigger, and more violent, movement. The 2019 movement was bigger, longer, and more violent than the peaceful 2014

movement, but eventually repressed by Hong Kong police, backed by Beijing.

In 2020, as a response to the failed 2019 movement, the Chinese government introduced the national security law. Imposed directly by Beijing following the mass pro-democracy protests, this law criminalized secession, subversion, terrorism, and foreign interference. It introduced specialized security agencies, allowed for trials without juries, and established jurisdiction over offenses committed by anyone worldwide. The law affected academic freedom and also any intellectual conversation and journalism in Hong Kong. After the implementation of the national security law, opposition lawmakers were disqualified, independent media outlets were shut down, and civil society organizations either closed on their own from the pressure or were disbanded by the government.

Reflecting on my final years in Hong Kong—after the introduction of the national security law—what I felt most deeply, was not government censorship, not university censorship, but self-censorship.

Previously, topics open for discussion at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology—especially in the social sciences—were very liberal, especially in the context of Chinese culture and institutions. Before the national security law, my class discussions were very, very open and liberal; we discussed democratization, social movements, political autonomy, and human rights very freely. Afterward, doing so became highly sensitive. It was clear that students found open discussion about these topics uncomfortable, especially in groups. Some students approached me in person after class or during office hours to speak openly about their thoughts; they wouldn't do so in front of their peers.

Individual curiosity was there, but students had to lay low under a blanket of collective silence. This dynamic became obvious in the discussion about propaganda and silencing in Professor Ben-Ghiat's talk. Even without any overt censorship—and with university policies remaining unclear about class discussions—we found ourselves

self-censoring out of sheer discomfort and a feeling of being unsafe.

I admit that I self-censored myself as well—not out of personal fear, but out of concern for my students, my colleagues, and my co-authors from mainland China who still have families there.

Let me also share a subtle but hopeful story. Looking back, the university administration was relatively passive during this period. Because all major universities in Hong Kong are public institutions, it's somewhat understandable why they chose neither to actively repress nor actively protect us. The pressure did not necessarily originate from within the university; rather, the heaviest pressure came from the outside. This dynamic is remarkably similar to what some of our colleagues have experienced recently as well.

The universities, as I recall, tried their best to do the bare minimum and stay safe. Ironically, this institutional inaction gave faculty members a feeling of being in an ivory tower. Stripped of its usual negative connotations, this tower offered us a deep sense of solidarity among our colleagues.

We simply continued what we had always done: teaching, researching, and carrying out our daily routines. We resolved to perform our tasks until explicitly told not to by the university or outside forces. Knowing the administration would not interfere out of its own initiative, we continued to teach critical thinking and cover the same topics as before—until someone would physically step in and tell us to stop.

So, at least until I left Hong Kong, the university never explicitly told me to abandon a subject of study. I was lucky enough not to be caught by the pro-government observers as well. This ivory tower was never a fortress that could promise legal protection; instead, it was simply a community of like-minded colleagues holding the line together.

Do not give in to what is happening outside. Do your research and pursue what is right and true, as we all should. Just be professional. Even now, most of the critical work about the Hong Kong government, Hong Kong politics, and Chinese politics, is still being produced within Hong Kong academia, and I'm very proud of

that. Major high-level changes have transformed the city into something very different from what it used to be. I sincerely believe that a similar shift could happen in the United States. If we ever face a remotely similar situation, our everyday actions will matter immensely—especially for the students. Because we within the university are relatively better protected than the activists and fighters, we have a duty to hold the line together inside this ivory tower.

RESPONSE

RONALD SUNY

So let me thank everybody, and thank you, Dr. Ben Ghiat, for a wonderful talk, and for your optimism. The book that she wrote, *Strongmen*, ends with the collapse of the strongmen. And I'm basically a naive optimist. I believe that pessimism and cynicism lead to the right, and optimism and hope are what we as academics and as pedagogues should be ultimately delivering to our students.

I want to start by saying that, in my opinion—and I'm a Soviet historian; I study the Soviet Union and Russia today—suppressing speech and intellectual freedom is not only difficult, it's actually impossible. It can be restricted. It can be punished. It can be driven underground. But speech—and its cousin, intellectual freedom—is incredibly resilient. It finds ways—often sneaky ways—to continue. It reappears in ways that may be disguised: Aesopian language, perhaps, in various kinds of dissent, and even in silence.

So, when I study the Soviet Union and Russia today, I think about the people who are still struggling against what was done in that country. It wasn't so easy under Stalin, a period of repression and terror, but later after his death in 1953, it became possible with the dissidents' movement beginning in the 1960s and with other forms of quiet resistance, even in academia, which at the same time was collaborating with the state in some ways. I think also of heroes of intellectual freedom in other authoritarian regimes. Think of the great Italian Marxist and Communist Antonio Gramsci, who, from his prison cell, continued to write—things that have now become resonant, sadly, not only on the left but also on the right; they're learning the lessons of Gramsci and how he managed to make Mussolini's attempt to muzzle his mind a great failure.

Now, it is true, as Professor Ben-Ghiat told us today and as all of us are observing, that there is an authoritarianism creeping through the United States, and a kind of state project being constructed in our very midst. And indeed, it has a particular way of trying to achieve this.

At the current moment, the radical right in the United States wants to take over, conquer, create—in Gramsci’s sense—a cultural hegemony in civil society, similar to what it already holds with the state. The Republican Party is this monolithic party that apologizes and defends Trump. The Supreme Court has also been falling under Trump’s authority to some extent. Obviously, the branches of government are not acting in the balanced way that the founders intended. But imagine if the Right actually could control civil society—the institutions and associations outside of the state, including the media and academia. That is part of their agenda. It’s precisely what Gramsci was talking about, how the Left also had to create a counter-hegemony to prevent that part of our political establishment from conquering and taking over. Are there signs of this? We know the signs, and Professor Ben-Ghiat talked about them very well in a series of authoritarian efforts.

Think of what happened in this week’s elections when there was a pushback against many of these attempts. There were elections, after all. This is still a democracy. Now, don’t

think democracy is a complete guard against authoritarianism, violence, or even genocide. Israel is still constituted as a democracy, yet it committed genocide—and I applaud Dr. Peterson for reminding us of this. But yesterday, in the elections, society struck back.

Some days ago, a dissident from Putin's Russia, Vladimir Kara-Murza, spoke and won our Wallenberg Medal. His message—which was so resonant in our own moment—to the students and to whoever else was listening was, “Don’t be afraid.” Don’t be afraid because fear already plays into their hands.

The radical right wants to undermine civil society and create what Professor Ben-Ghiat called a “moral collapse”—a state essential to authoritarianism. In fact, these are precisely the conditions that fear will lead us to.

Now, it's not easy to be brave. Kara-Murza was an incredible example. He went to prison, he was poisoned twice, and he is a very brave man. What we also have to avoid in a democratic society is complicity—by staying silent, looking out for our own advantages, and giving in to

whatever makes it easiest to advance our careers, right? As someone who was turned down for tenure the first time at Oberlin College because I was a Marxist, I know firsthand why we have to be fearless and continue to push against these forces. By the way, within a week they gave in and I got tenure. I never got a merited salary increase again, but I did survive, and then I came to the University of Michigan.

We're going to watch as this authoritarian tendency occurs, and it seems to me that it's going to become increasingly violent. Now, violence is central not only to authoritarianism, but to fascism. So that's something we have to watch out for, and we have to protect those institutions—like this university—which are so central to protecting intellectual freedom and speech.

In her talk, Professor Ben-Ghiat highlighted the similarities—the stylistic and institutional similarities—between authoritarians and the movements toward authoritarianism. Let's also emphasize, and this is something historians do rather well, the distinctions between these different things. If you have a democracy that

is already being threatened, you still have institutions, abilities, and capacities that you may not have in Putin's Russia. But you do have them in Israel. You do have them in Orbán's Hungary. You do have them in Erdoğan's Turkey—there are still elections in Turkey, after all, even with the leaders of oppositional parties languishing in prison.

So let me finish by talking a bit about Putin's Russia. Now, in Russia, you would think you ought to be pessimistic because authoritarianism is already so well-established; the attack on civil society has been very effective. But I can tell you, as someone who studies it and talks regularly to people in Russia online since I can't go there anymore—that the regime is ineffective in suppressing all dissent. Yes, there is large-scale support for the war with Ukraine, but there is also a quiet, persistent resistance to it, which is growing. There was a huge migration of people who opposed the war, people who turned away, and even those—as Kara-Murza mentioned—who fight against what's happening through music and through organization. So, yes, there are

reasons to be pessimistic, if you want to be, but there are also brave people and bright spots that encourage us to be optimistic and hopeful.

At this time in the United States, authoritarianism is creeping forward day by day. But as Professor Ben-Ghiat said today, there are also incredible reasons to be optimistic. I would say, as she said, “Don’t ever underestimate the American people,” and the opportunities to resist that still exist.

And—this will sound really strange to you—don’t ever underestimate the Russian people either. Our cliché about Russia is that these are people who love slavery—that they just never had it right, always living under serfdom and communism, and now they’ve given in to Putin. No, actually, that’s not true. If you know any Russian history, think of the number of times ordinary people have gone out in the streets to make revolutionary change, like in 1905, in 1917. Even in the Putin period, they’ve gone out to demonstrate against these things, such as in the Navalny demonstrations.

Think about the protests all over the world. I mean not only those in the 1960s—which I'm proud to have been a part of—but the Arab Spring, what went on in Bangladesh, and, as Dr. Hong mentioned, the student uprising in Nepal. Look at our own encampments against the atrocities in Gaza: they were repressed, but in fact, they bear witness to what is possible. So I say, and I want to end with this, we've got to think positively. We've got to be optimistic, even when it feels very difficult not to despair. And indeed, ultimately, we will win.

Q AND A

DEREK PETERSON: Before we take questions from the crowd, let me simply ask Dr. Ben-Ghiat and other members of our group to respond to a question I had while listening to the lecture, and that is, “Is it, in fact, true that autocracies are supported by hollowed-out people, in the way that Dr. Ben-Ghiat described it—people who are in a state of moral collapse? Or is it rather that autocracies are very often supported by people who are inspired by the opportunity that the state might be harnessed for the purposes of national or collective liberation?” My own work on Idi Amin’s Uganda, and perhaps also Dr. Suny’s work on Stalin’s Russia, suggests that it’s actually people who see themselves as patriots liberating their people from outside oppressors who are the most urgent supporters of autocratic regimes. They find in the autocratic state a means of achieving a kind of liberation that they feel to be historically necessary. So, I doubt Dr. Ben-Ghiat’s thesis that

supporters of autocracies must be moral zombies. Is that, in fact, true?

RUTH BEN-GHIAT: I agree with you; authoritarians have been extraordinarily good at mobilizing people by playing on grievances. Trump was very brilliant in this regard, addressing Americans as “the forgotten.” I wasn’t trying to imply that the people who become hollowed out are the fervent supporters. When we talk about hollowing out institutions, we don’t look at the effects on people. These are the people who are often just trying to exist. I wanted to highlight how ultimately, these regimes are a mix of fanaticism and zealotry, but also nihilism, where truth is destroyed.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn talked about how the lies depend on the violence, and there’s the synergy between the lies and the violence, and the obliteration of everything in the service of power. That’s where we get the behaviors that some of the commentators mentioned, how you survive autocracy through this kind of stultifying sense that you can’t be authentic, and Hannah Arendt

addressed this, too. You have coded language. You have necessary self-censorship. You have constant concealment. I remember a comment by someone who lived under Putin who said they have four faces: one for the public, one at work, one at home, and one only with his wife.

DEREK PETERSON: Thank you for that. Perhaps we ought to have questions from the crowd.

AUDIENCE MEMBER I: Thank you. I always come to these talks because they were founded by the University of Michigan Ann Arbor AAUP chapter, and I currently serve as an officer. If anyone is not in our AAUP chapter, please look us up. You can join.

This week, there was an important report released by the American Association of University Professors and the Middle East Studies Association about the weaponization of civil rights law, and specifically Title VI complaints. The details are eye-opening and staggering, and it just resonated with the talk that you gave, and

also with some of Dr. Suny's comments and the other commentators about self-censorship and silencing. So, the report in its overview summary says that antisemitism investigations are producing a new system of government surveillance and monitoring of campus speech. The advocacy organizations, including those without any campus presence, have driven this surge in antisemitism investigations and at least 78 percent of the complaints over the past two years. In at least 24 percent of them, the group bringing the complaint is an external group with no connection to the campus. In the reporting about this, one of these groups, Stand With Us, is quoted as saying that they work very closely with the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs in bringing these complaints. So, I guess I'm asking a question about civil society, about multiple involvements. I'm not sure that the framework of authoritarianism or autocracy fully encompasses it, but what's happening is certainly about silencing, about conformity, about self-censorship, and I appreciate hearing your thoughts.

RUTH BEN-GHIAT: I think that is the bludgeon issue that is being used by the Trump administration and its foreign and domestic supporters. It unites, because we know that evangelicals are a very important plank. I agree that maybe this goes more broadly than just authoritarianism, as you said. It's important that every ruler who wants to be authoritarian has these kinds of support networks and pillars of society. Christian evangelicals who are part of this policing of antisemitism because they are allies of Israel and proponents of a holy war inspired by messianic ideologies are an important part of MAGA. On this basis, Christian evangelicals as well as Jews have tended to label any criticism of Israel for its ethnic cleansing policies in Gaza as "antisemitism" and this has had a chilling effect, with authoritarian methods used such as investigations of critics and deportations of pro-Palestine students.

RONALD SUNY: This is maybe not exactly an answer to your question, but it just woke up something in my mind. These authoritarian

regimes—and you see this right now—are very clever at creating enemies that don’t actually exist. It’s not that there isn’t antisemitism. There’s always antisemitism, there’s always Islamophobia, and there’s other kinds of phobias and “antis.” But they use that as a weapon to then manufacture enemies, like academics in general. Yet, in my experience—I taught for 55 years—the academy was one of the places where people were least antisemitic, and where the fight against antisemitism was actually part of the curriculum.

Then, Trump called Mamdani a communist. Really? Communists were not democratic socialists; they were authoritarian socialists. (I’m sorry to say that.) And universities as “incubators of Marxism”? Really? If only that were true! But it’s not. I would have felt more at home! It’s heavily liberal, right? But one of the things about liberalism is that there’s debate between left, right, and so forth. So, we have to struggle against these kinds of falsities and creation of fake enemies. In Russia, it was *vragi naroda*—“enemies of the people.” That phrase is actually used by the Right

today, and Trump used it to characterize the media.

DEREK PETERSON: Okay, let's go to the next question.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 2: What is to be done about the fact that university administrations themselves are pushing things that facilitate moral collapse, that facilitate silences? The two examples that are at the forefront of my mind are the push for students to use artificial intelligence to “expand their thinking,” and the use of police on campus to violently suppress student protesters. What do we do when administrations are promoting the very things that we are talking about here in this discussion?

RUTH BEN-GHIAT: I was thinking Professor Hong would be more qualified than me, but I will pick up from her very wise remarks at the end of her comments that our everyday actions will matter to our students, and that, within our community and our ivory tower, we need to show

solidarity to each other. Campuses are part of civil society, and it's very important to show solidarity to colleagues who are targeted and to model democratic values as the political climate becomes more repressive. Often, we're quick to denounce people, but I think it's really important to send support to people who are standing up—not only the direct people standing up, but people who support people who are standing up—and create a chain of goodwill, because that's showing solidarity as well. It's not easy to speak out, even for members of Congress. You think that people wouldn't care about hearing from you, but it's important to stand up and support those behaviors, whether it's on campus or externally.

JI YEON HONG: I will try not to self-censor myself here. Even at the peak of the protests in Hong Kong, I don't recall the police being on campus. Maybe they were busy repressing protesters on the streets? I remember that was a major debate at the time: whether police should be allowed on campus to investigate or surveil the students or filter out activists, but at least where

I worked, it was not permitted. That, I think, speaks for itself.

DEREK PETERSON: We've got a few minutes left. I think we ought to have the last three questioners ask their questions, and then we'll address all three together.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 3: Just a little bit of background. I'm a postdoc in a STEM department. I essentially live under a rock, and even though I absolutely agree with everything you said, I'm not super familiar with perhaps some of the foundations here, so sorry if this is a naive question. But what is the mechanism by which silent protest will act against the moral collapse if we're preaching to the choir? I'm thinking about this in terms of, like, a No Kings march in a place that's already very liberal? I'm not questioning whether it is important or works but I don't know how.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 4: Hi, I'm Simone Davis. Among other things, I'm Chandler Davis's

daughter. I wanted to share one very quick anecdote and then ask a question. The anecdote is triggered by Dr. Suny's remarks. One of the very last political gestures my father made in his life, from a hospital bed, was to join an international conference in support of an imprisoned Russian young mathematician dissident. I really appreciated your bringing to light the fact that not all Russians are the same as each other, and the fact of that powerful, powerful presence of a very brave dissidence there. Thank you for that.

My question is something I'm struggling with about the relationship between *violence* violence and the kind of *intellectual* violence that results in self-censorship, etc. We've got ICE on the streets. I've worked for years with colleagues and students in prison, and I think about how the fact of them being sequestered, and that the violence that was happening there being apart from the rest of society seems so important. But right now it seems like the lips between realms are dissolving, and I'm struggling to understand how these different kinds of violence intersect.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 5: Thank you. My question is a follow-up to a previous audience member's question. We can see the value of mass protests, like No Kings, where you have millions, but what about more local protests? At the last No Kings protest, we got 5,000 people in Ann Arbor before a football game. Two weeks later, we did a follow-up and got 200. We're going to do another one before the Ohio State game. But my other question is, "How do we link up to the university and to the young people? Because now it's mostly us seniors. How do we get the generations working together on this?"

DEREK PETERSON: Okay, so two questions about protest and its effect and its organization, and then a more analytical question about how different kinds of violence intersect. Who would like to start addressing those?

RONALD SUNY: Lenin said, "Seize every podium," so ...

No King's March, let's start there. Whether it's 200 people or 7 million—as there were in the last

demonstration—I think it’s very important that there be a presence, that people appear, and that people know there are others like them. There’s something strengthening in solidarity. It seems to me extraordinarily important to know that you’re not alone, that there are others out there like you.

Of course, marching isn’t the only way to achieve this. I remember in the 1960s, students asking, “I want to be radical. What should I do that’s radical? What *is* being radical?” What I thought then, and still think now, is that being radical means being honest and acting with integrity. Do you know how difficult that is in a society that rewards complicity, compromise, and adjusting to the powers that be? I mean, look at the Republican Party. Look at how Trump has manipulated and dominated part of civil society.

It seems to me that each of us individually—without giving up on the collective aspect—must focus on acting with integrity, being honest, doing our work, and seeing where it takes us. Because that is what the university is about. The university is about finding truths. We all know the doubts about truth, but it’s about finding different

truths and seeing where they lead. It seems to me this is hard. A lot of forces work against you, but you keep doing it anyway—swimming upstream and embodying what Dr. Hong called “critical thinking.” For me, Marxism is a critical way of thinking. Good liberalism is a critical way of thinking. This is where our true strength lies.

KARIMA BENNOUNE: Thank you very much for these questions. I want to answer a couple of them. As mentioned, I teach international human rights law, and I believe that in times like these, what a university models is far more important than what I say in the classroom. It’s very difficult to try to teach and instill human rights values if students are going to be pepper sprayed at close range. The practice is absolutely as important as what we are attempting to teach in the classroom.

In response to the question with regard to No Kings, I do think we have to do everything we can to get out of our echo chambers and build the broadest possible coalition that supports basic democratic values, bringing together the center-right, the center-left. I think some of the center-

right voices right now, like The Lincoln Project, are absolutely critically important. I encourage us all to reach out to those who may have very different views, but who share similar core values, to come together in defense of intellectual freedom.

RUTH BEN-GHIAT: These are great questions. One of my maxims, besides “never underestimate the American people,” is “use all the tools and spaces at your disposal for peaceful protest.” Not everybody wants to be in the streets. For example, immediately after the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, a lot of young people did incredible work building apps for consumer boycotts against the junta that told people, in real time, which businesses were collaborating with the junta. Boycotts are very popular with all ages.

I’m a big fan of registering people to vote. We should never, ever give up on the vote. I have people who write to me or tell me, “You can’t vote your way out of fascism.” But that’s just fatalistic and cynical, in my book. There are many things that you can do; you don’t have to be going into

the streets, although I agree with what Professor Suny said. It's very important to be present and show up for others, no matter what the numbers are, that someone cares and is out there.

Regarding the violence, in periods like this—and this is why I wanted to call attention to the breaking of taboos—it's true that there's physical violence that's first directed at certain categories of people and then expands, and there's also the threat of violence. Regimes rely—especially today with the informational autocracies that were mentioned—on that threat working. Because violence, as Professor Hong says, is costly. It's costly reputationally. It's costly in a monetary way. So, the threat of violence bleeds into the actual violence. In a well-run authoritarian state, you never know if you're going to be next, and so then you are more inclined to self-censor.

I'm glad I heard so much optimism here, because sometimes people think I'm just some kind of weirdo idealist, but I truly believe from my study of autocracy that there are always more of us than them. That is why autocrats are always

running scared, always building their bunkers and ballrooms, and musing and brooding over what might happen to them. Such is the power of the people. I'll finish with that. Thank you.

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Ji Yeon Hong

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The truth about academic freedom is that it is a practice of continual renewal and reaffirmation, not a protective buttress safe from political weathering. The persistence of academic freedom depends on the continuing efforts of a community of free-thinking minds who enact its value: as a prerequisite for the production, distribution, and maintenance of knowledge and for any free-ranging artistic exploration of the human condition. For this reason, the annual University of Michigan Faculty Senate's Davis, Markert, Nickerson (DMN) Lecture on Academic and Intellectual Freedom was created—serving as a constant reminder of academic and intellectual freedom as praxis. Through the annual lecture, the ongoing work of academic freedom is performed by many people, without whom the lecture too would weather away. I write to acknowledge and thank them for their action.

To each of the speakers who participated in the 2025 lecture, the 35th in the series, thank you.

We heard remarks from U-M Faculty Senate Chair Derek Peterson, Provost Laurie McCauley, U-M professors Karima Bennoune, Ji Yeon Hong, and Ronald Suny, as well as our distinguished speaker: Professor Ruth Ben-Ghiat. The conversation was lively and thought provoking, with the focus on “Intellectual Freedom in an Authoritarian Age” being especially apropos to our current historical moment. In particular, thanks to Professor Ben-Ghiat for her ongoing public commitment to speaking on the dangers of authoritarianism, which is seldom easy in the face of authoritarianism. Thanks also to the remarkable mix of faculty, staff, students, and members of the public who attended the lecture. Their attendance was itself a critical act in the performance of academic freedom. I also thank the three namesakes of the lecture, who are unfortunately no longer with us: Chandler Davis, Clement Markert, and Mark Nickerson. Their actions in furtherance of academic and intellectual freedom continue each year through the lecture.

This year, the lecture was augmented by the launch of a collection of essays related to Chandler Davis’s work, edited by U-M faculty who I will

also thank: Michael Atzmon, John Cheney-Lippold, Gary Krenz, and Melanie Tanielian. *In The Spirit of H. Chandler Davis: Activism and the Struggle for Academic Freedom* included a number of longtime practitioners of academic freedom who deserve acknowledgement of their continuing efforts: Joan Scott, Natalie Zemon Davis, Stefan Hanß, Alan Wald, Ellen Schrecker, Catherine Stimpson, Michael Bérubé, Gene Nichol, Silke-Maria Weineck, Marjorie Heins, Henry Reichman, Dima Khalidi, and Juan Cole. The volume was made possible through Michigan Press and the essential academic freedom work of Disobedience Press, which provides a platform for voices that might otherwise be unheard. I also want to thank the children of Chandler Davis, two of whom attended this year's lecture and the event's concluding book launch of the new volume.

The lecture series would not be possible without the oversight of the Faculty Senate leadership, especially the faculty members of the DMN planning committee: Craig Smith and Nick Tobier (Co-Chairs), Michael Atzmon, Pauline Jones, Gretchen Keppel-Aleks, Brian Love, Kim

Saks, Seda Saluk, Niloofar Sarlati, and Basit Zafar. The committee's work was assisted by two remarkable students: Thandiwe-Kesi Robins and Margaret Peterman. The lecture was also supported by the Faculty Senate's executive committee, the Senate Advisory Committee on University Affairs (SACUA): Derek Peterson (Chair), Soumya Rangarajan (Vice Chair), Jesse Capecelatro, Kirsten Herold, Vilma Mesa, Susan Najita, Heather O'Malley, Kentaro Toyama, and Melanie Tanielian as the SACUA liaison to the DMN committee. The lecture was further supported by the leadership of Rogério Pinto (Senate Secretary), Dierdre Spencer (Senate Parliamentarian), and Rebekah Modrak (SACUA Immediate Past Chair and designer of this year's promotional image).

A collection of problem-solving staff performed miracles few are aware of, but they deserve special attention. The staff of the Faculty Senate Office includes Meaghan Blanchard, Ann Marshall, and Eric Vandenberghe—each a member of E. M. Forster's hidden "aristocracy of the sensitive, the considerate and the plucky."

They handled the event logistics with a remarkable “can-do” spirit. The event would have failed entirely but for the unseen heroics of the audio/visual team, including the Michigan Media team led by Karl Cole, and JD Jordan’s Central Campus 1 IT team, with exceptional efforts by Chase Cranmer, Ayesha Khanam, and Jeremiah St. Clair. We had an unexpected and late program shift to facilitating a hybrid panel—posing technological challenges that this remarkable AV team *transformed into opportunities*. Thank you also to Rachel Knisley for assisting as the venue coordinator and for the accessibility services of Kristine Teshima and Annette Blough (CART captioning) as well as Sabrina Boykin and Theresa Hill (ASL). Additional individuals who should be acknowledged for their assistance are Kayla Niemman and Greg Teachout in the Provost’s Office, Dirk Milliman and Genevieve Monsma at the *University Record*, Ellen Perry at Michigan Public, Hannah Bodnar at *The Michigan Daily*, Daryl Marshke from Michigan Photography, and finally, assisting with the lecture finances that make action possible, Jamie Zawistowski and Brittany

Zydorczyk. I also want to express deep gratitude for the anonymous benefactor whose generous contribution supports the annual lecture. Thank you also to the U-M Initiative for Democracy & Civic Empowerment, which provided supplemental funds in support of this year's lecture.

The mission of the University of Michigan, and any university for that matter, would not be achievable but for ongoing action in furtherance of academic and intellectual freedom. Some of those actions are quite public, but others are hidden from sight. I have the special privilege of seeing both the public and hidden efforts, and I thank everyone for their continuing commitment to the practice of free thought performed through the DMN lecture series.

With appreciation,

Luke McCarthy

DIRECTOR, U-M FACULTY SENATE OFFICE



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