

OPERATION MIND

A BRIEF DOCUMENTARY ACCOUNT OF THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON UN-AMERICAN ACTIVITIES.
AND WHY IT MATTERS NOW.

NATALIE ZEMON DAVIS
ELIZABETH DOUVAN

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FOREWORD

ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN, MARCH 2025.

SILKE-MARIA WEINECK

All politics are “Operation Mind.” Until they become Operation Law, Operation Gun, Operation Jail.

Reading this “pamphlet,” written by Natalie Zemon Davis and Elizabeth Douvan in 1952, is an emotional experience, precisely because it is such a somber, fact-driven text. Data. History. Names. A matter-of-fact account of ruined lives and reputations, of ideological terror, of entire industries going silent because going silent seemed prudent. It is moving to watch Davis and Douvan—young women, graduate students, vulnerable—deciding against prudence. Because, as Gramsci said, “living means taking sides. Those who really live cannot help being a citizen and a

partisan. Indifference and apathy are parasitism, perversion, not life.”

And yet, as I am writing this just a few weeks into the second Trump administration, the perversion of apathy is all round us. HUAC,* the thing, has few defenders now, but HUAC, the idea, is growing tentacles daily: the idea that there is one correct way to be American and one correct way to write its history, that those who speak for the powerless must be erased from the nation’s view and their work at universities must cease, that dissent itself is un-American, that universities—the ultimate Counter-Operation Mind—are dangerous, subversive institutions that must be reined in, stunted, and defunded—most of all research that seeks to shed light on injustice past and present, be it racism, misogyny, disregard for the disabled, hatred for anybody who is not heterosexual or is living in an identity not assigned to them at birth. It doesn’t matter where and how that research is conducted: in

* the House Un-American Activities Committee

medicine or the natural sciences, the social sciences or the humanities—it all must go if the vandals in the White House and their allies get their way.

All this runs counter to the university's mission, and you would have expected our presidents, provosts, lobbyists, and deans to cry out against it in one voice, to mobilize our alumni, to speak clearly, compassionately, and furiously—but there has been mostly silence along with meek compliance and vague reassurances that, behind the scenes, somebody is working with somebody to do something, perhaps. As progressive academics during McCarthy's reign found out, university administrators will side with power more often than not. The University of Michigan's graduate library is still named after the president who suspended Clement Markert, Mark Nickerson, and Chandler Davis, Natalie Zemon Davis' husband, after the three refused to testify.

In many ways, the fact that there is no longer a single committee in charge of swinging

these ideological clubs makes it harder to fight them. In the place of HUAC, there are, to give just one example, a thousand school boards captured by reactionaries who are themselves Gramscians of a sort, intent on seizing cultural hegemony. They, too, are taking sides. And they will not stop until they have banned every book that features trans women, gay men, Black history. Unless we stop them, but that "we" has to emerge without support from our administrators. Instead, universities across the country have adopted shameful "institutional neutrality" rules, as if we should be neutral about our own destruction.

Every poll tells us these vandals are the minority, that most of us don't believe them, that they themselves are the un-American ones. To be sure, Trump and the Republicans won the 2024 election, because of the price of eggs, we were told, or because of the Democrat's shameful complicity in the Gaza massacres, or because Kamala Harris laughed too much, or because anti-bias training workshops are annoying. But a minority they nonetheless are: their policies are already deeply

unpopular, and their approval numbers are dropping every day. Unfortunately, we live in a country that has made a foul peace with minoritarian rule, a peace frequently abetted by universities themselves, and while we can never give up on seeking to persuade, with data, history, and names, reason alone will not be enough. Everything is narrative now, meme, or outright lies. Cruelty reigns, and we are hurtling towards an abyss. Neutrality is not an option: there is no outside of politics other than apathy, parasitism, perversion.

It is exhausting to battle the right-wing hydra and its centrist toadies, two heads sprouting for every one you lop off, and no way to cauterize the necks. It's exhausting to have to fight. But if Natalie Zemon Davis and Elizabeth Douvan could go to work, methodically, calmly, and furiously documenting their moment, honoring, in every word they wrote, their chosen trade, the production and dissemination of knowledge, then we can honor them in turn. By being relentlessly truthful and relentlessly partisan, in short: by living.

* * * * *

Silke-Maria Weineck is the Grace Lee Boggs Professor of Comparative Literature and German Studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. She is interested in figurations of power, be they literary, cultural, or institutional.

WRITING OPERATION MIND

TORONTO, ONTARIO, AUGUST 2022.

NATALIE ZEMON DAVIS

O*peration Mind* was written in early 1952, a time of growing political hysteria about the alleged dangers of Communism in the US. We had come to Ann Arbor two years before, as my husband Chandler Davis, a new PhD from Harvard, took up a post as Lecturer in the Department of Mathematics. With my BA from Smith and my MA from Radcliffe behind me, I was a graduate student in the Department of History, endowed with a good fellowship and enjoying the exploration of early modern history. We made friends, including with progressive-minded folk on the faculty, and participated in the activities—mostly educational—of the small Council of the Arts, Sciences and Professions (ASP). I was especially eager to meet women,

for we were few in number among the graduate students at that time. I especially became friends with Elizabeth Douvan, who had graduated from Vassar some years before and who was working for her PhD in the new field of Social Psychology. Like me, she was married (her husband was a law student), and like me, she intended one day to have children once she had some professional achievement to her credit.

The visit of HUAC to Michigan was announced in early 1952, and members of ASP put their minds to what to do about it. My idea for a pamphlet came out of this concern. As a history student, however, I didn't want the pamphlet to be a simple political tract, but rather a documented account of HUAC's activities and impact. This meant putting my grad school lessons to work in proper research, documentation, and footnotes!

Libby and I discussed the materials as I found them in the HUAC archives, and then together we did the final assembling and writing of the pamphlet. Operation Mind! We used "operation" in a way that was then new and summed up what we saw as the Committee's

goal: turning people away from concern with progressive social causes and frightening them into a conservative way of thinking about politics. We showed that HUAC's questioning strayed far from its congressional charge to seek facts about acts of force and violence intended to overthrow the government of the United States. Instead, witnesses were asked about or accused of membership in various organizations, including trade unions, deemed "communist" by the Committee, with dire consequences for those who refused to answer properly.

The pamphlet was published first in mimeographed form and then printed by Edwards Brothers in downtown Ann Arbor. Libby and I decided not to put our names on the pamphlet: the title page simply said "Distributed by University of Michigan Council of the Arts, Sciences and Professions; [and] the Civil Liberties Committee of the University of Michigan." When the HUAC investigators tried to find the author, the best they could do was seek out Edwards Brothers printers. They obliged by giving them my husband's name as he had paid the printing bill. (This information

surfaced later in HUAC's questioning of Chandler: he was charged with responsibility for a pamphlet that in fact Libby and I had authored!)

I don't recall what response we received from students and colleagues when *Operation Mind* appeared in early 1952. The next major landmark for us was in October 1953, when Chandler received a subpoena from HUAC (he would ultimately testify in the spring of 1954, refusing to answer questions on the basis of the First Amendment). Colleagues gave him impressive support during that period and afterward, when he struggled in vain to keep his post at the University of Michigan.

Meanwhile I had only limited contact with my fellow graduate students. Quite apart from Chandler's challenge to HUAC, I gave birth to our first child in 1953 and tried to do research for my doctoral dissertation. Still, I do recall conversations with history students such as Helen Tanner, doing pioneering research on indigenous history. We stayed away from politics, and Helen may never have seen *Operation Mind*.

As I think back on it from 2021, I'm happy to think of my early effort to support freedom of speech. It failed to stop HUAC, but served to remind me of the high goals we should have as historians.

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ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN, FEBRUARY 1951.

NATALIE ZEMON DAVIS
ELIZABETH DOUVAN

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A Brief Documentary Account
of the House Committee on
Un-American Activities

Distributed by

University of Michigan Council of
the Arts, Sciences and Professions;
Civil Liberties Committee of the
University of Michigan

Ann Arbor
February, 1952

Sec. 34.66, P

For the third time in five years, the House Committee on Un-American Activities is threatening to come to Michigan. Hearings are scheduled to begin in Detroit February 25th. This unwelcome visit, according to newspaper and radio accounts, will probably extend to Ann Arbor.

The Committee has announced that it is especially interested in 'Red infiltration' into defense industries. Representative Charles E. Potter (R., Mich.), a member of the Committee, has taken pains to protest that the group does not intend to interfere in labor affairs or to smash labor unions. In spite of Representative Potter's pious assurances, the hearings will very nearly coincide with important elections in several unions, notably Ford Local 600 of the UAW, and with an increasingly vocal protest on the part of this and other unions against the cold war unemployment of some 200,000 of their members.*

* Walter Reuther, President of the UAW, has recently announced his refusal to cooperate with the Committee on Un-American Activities (*Detroit Times*, February 10, 1952.).

In view of this impending visit, as a public service, the Ann Arbor Council of the Arts, Sciences and Professions has prepared the following brief account of the Un-American Committee, its history, its methods, and its aims.

Detroit's First Visit of the "Un-Americans"

The first visit of a Committee on Un-American Activities to Michigan took place 14 years ago in October, 1938, when the Dies Committee came to Detroit.*

Much of its investigation, coinciding with the organizing of unions in the automobile industry, centered around trade union leaders. Walter Reuther, Victor Reuther, and Emil Mazey were attacked as un-American.¹ On the eve of a gubernatorial election, Governor Frank Murphy was slandered by witnesses as a traitor

* The House Committee on Un-American Activities was informally known as the Dies Committee after its founder Martin Dies, Jr., a Texas congressman. [*added by editors in 2025]

for requesting the brief postponement of a court injunction against a strike.² He lost the election.

The Committee also paid considerable attention to intellectuals and professional people. It considered medical aid to Loyalist Spain heinous, and it singled out several prominent professors at the University of Michigan for attack on this score.³ At least 10 teachers in the Detroit area public schools were attacked, not for their behavior in the classroom but for their political activities.⁴ For example:

Huldah Fine—she is secretary of the Detroit Local 231 of the Federation of Teachers and is a director of the League for Industrial Democracy ... That is an organization of ‘pinks’ who have a lot of different ideas.⁵

Walter Bergman was attacked not only for his support of Sacco and Vanzetti but also because he

hides his real ‘red’ color by calling himself a member of the Socialist Party

and by being a personal candidate for political office on the Socialist ticket. He is president of the Detroit Federation of Teachers and a member of the executive committee of the League for Industrial Democracy, a strictly Communist organization.⁶

Furthermore, in May 1933 he spoke at a “demonstration held in protest against the Hitler movement and against the Facist movement.”⁷

Religious leaders were not immune from the slander of the Committee. An outstanding Detroit rabbi, Leon Fram, was charged with being a member of the American Civil Liberties Union, favoring the boycott of German goods and supporting medical aid to the Loyalists.⁸

The kind of witnesses used to impugn the characters of these educators and civic leaders is exemplified by W. S. Reynolds, who testified against the above-mentioned rabbi. In another connection, Reynolds stated:

New York is the site of the part of the American population which gave communism to the world and imported that doctrine into the American soil through Ellis Island.

It is noteworthy that young Negroes, whatever Communist net they have been caught into, will readily admit that their interest in communism lies in white women ... The idea of racial equality is preached by the Communists, although unnatural and repugnant to the American Negro in general.⁹

Communists popularized the idea of racial equality to the point where also in Detroit several mixed marriages have been solemnized.¹⁰

Shortly after the Dies Committee concluded its hearings in Detroit, the Detroit Board of Education ordered an investigation of

“Communist membership” or “sympathy toward subversive and un-American doctrines” among school teachers, the Detroit Police Department to be called upon to furnish detailed information.¹¹

A Decade of “Smear” Tactics

“But,” you say, “that was in 1938. How do we know that the Committee has not changed in character and purpose?”

The Record of the Committee’s activities in the past few years indicates that its character has changed in no essential way. Throughout its history the Committee has never concerned itself with acts of force and violence designed to overthrow the government of the United States. It has not questioned people about concealing arms or about organizing groups to commit violent acts against minorities. It has never fulfilled its most basic duty in that it has never operated predominantly as a bona-fide *fact-finding body* to legislative ends.

On the contrary, the Committee has consistently used its powers to intimidate and

silence Americans whose political convictions and associations are different from its own norms. It has tried to obstruct legal political and union activities.

In 1947 and 1951, for example, the Committee investigated the motion picture industry in Hollywood.¹² There was never a charge made of force or violence against the United States. Ideas, not acts, were subjected to scrutiny—and even then the Committee failed to demonstrate the existence of Communist propaganda in films. The investigation consisted of attacks on individual writers, directors and actors for their personal views and associations. These attacks were often made on the basis of hearsay alone.¹³

That the Committee has smeared and obstructed union activities is evidenced in the Hollywood hearings: the Committee asked two standard questions of all “unfriendly witnesses” (J. Parnell Thomas’ appellation)—“Are you a member of the Screen Writers’ (or Directors’) Guild?” and “Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?”¹⁴ Three

possible explanations for the Committee's using this first question are: 1) that the Committee assumes that membership in these unions locates the political convictions of its members, 2) that the Committee assumes that these unions are *a priori* "un-American," or 3) that the Committee was attempting to associate the names of smeared witnesses with the unions and in this way to smear by implication the unions. In any case, these unions, without any direct investigation, were made to appear suspect in the eyes of the American people.

The committee, unconcerned with the investigation of *acts*, attempts principally to obtain from its witnesses as many *names* as possible of those with allegedly suspect political convictions. Moreover, not only the political convictions of those named or subpoenaed are suspect, but also *any* activities in which these people may engage. An example of this attitude is found in the 1951 hearings in Baltimore, where the following exchange took place:

The witness: I teach these various subjects (piano, counterpoint, music,

literature, score reading) that I mentioned: I hardly believe, gentlemen, that teaching music comes under the category of subversive activities.

Representative Walter: It depends on who the teacher is.

The witness: Really? That is very difficult to see how one can—

Representative Walter: Never mind. It is very apparent to me.¹⁵

The implication is that any of these unfavored people should be barred not only from working on vital defense projects but also from working at all.

What are “Un-American” Ideas?

Since the evidence indicates that the Committee has been primarily concerned with people because of the ideas they hold, it is well to look into its definition of un-American ideas.

Some of the testimony regarding Communist ideology in films, accepted by the Committee in the 1947 Hollywood hearings, is indicative. For example, J. L. Warner, in describing material unacceptable for the film *Humoresque*, said:

John Garfield played the part of the boy and he was mad at Joan Crawford for romantic reasons and said ‘Your father is a banker.’ He was alluding to the fact that she was rich and had all of the money. He said, ‘My father lives over a grocery store ...’ This is very, very subtle ...¹⁶

Mrs. Lela Rogers claimed that *None But the Lonely Heart* was Communistic, basing her contention on a newspaper statement that it was a “story pitched in a low key ... moody and somber throughout in the Russian manner.” Furthermore, Mrs. Rogers claimed that

the mother in the story runs a second-hand store. The son says to her, ‘You are not going to get me to work here

and squeeze pennies out of little people who are poorer than we are.’

Mrs. Rogers commented “We don’t necessarily squeeze pennies out of people poorer than we are. Many people are poorer and many people are richer.”¹⁷ Mrs. Rogers was thanked by the Committee for being “one of the outstanding experts on Communism in the United States.”¹⁸

Thus, the Committee considers that mild social criticism and “the Russian manner” are un-American. The Committee also feels very strongly that the ideas on foreign policy which disagree with its own are un-American. In investigating a peace committee in Baltimore, the Committee stated that it was all for peace, BUT, in the words of its counsel, Frank Tavenner, “If it is a peace on Communist terms instead of the interests of this country, it is a different proposition.”¹⁹ And what is “a peace on Communist terms?” The following question was asked of a witness by Committee member Donald Jackson:

What kind of peace do you think we could get on Soviet terms? What

do you think it would mean to the average individual in this country *to negotiate a peace* in light of the consistent record of the Communist Party for aggression outside their own frontiers? ...²⁰ (Italics added.)

Apparently any peace resulting from negotiation is a “Soviet” peace. Many Americans will agree with Representative Jackson that the United States should not seek agreements with the Soviet Union. But many will disagree. By what right does the Committee include them in its “Communist” smears? Whether the reader disagrees with Committee member Jackson about the solution of world problems is not at issue. What is important is that, while the essence of democracy is the right to one’s own political convictions, the Committee smears as un-American those convictions with which *it* disagrees.

Committee members have hardly been notorious for their defense of civil liberties.

Seven of nine present members voted to override President Truman's veto of the McCarran Act;²¹ and the Committee smeared the National Committee to defeat the Mundt Bill.*²² In a question directed to J. L. Warner during the first Hollywood hearings, Representative John McDowell cited a distinguished precedent for a favorite bill of his to outlaw the Communist Party: "You know during Hitler's regime they passed a law in Germany outlawing Communism and the Communists went to jail. Would you advocate the same thing here?"²³ In the same hearing the following exchange took place between Representative Vail and Eric Johnston

* The McCarran Internal Security Act of 1950 required Communist organizations to register with the Justice Department and established the Subversive Activities Control Board to investigate persons suspected of engaging in subversive activities.

The National Committee to Defeat the Mundt Bill (1948-1950) sought to oppose passage of the Mundt-Nixon Bill, a proposed bill that would have required all members of the U.S. Communist Party to register with the Attorney General. [*added by editors in 2025]

mentioned a film which “showed a colored boy in the picture with some white boys.”

Rep. Vail: He wasn't in the wood pile?

Mr. Johnston: No, nor under a chip.²⁴

Two of the present members of the Committee are Dixiecrats, Chairman John S. Wood of Georgia and James B. Frazier, Jr. of Tennessee. The Committee is obviously not sensitive to violations of civil liberties in the South. John Pace explained to them that after he left the Communist Party in 1935 he returned to Tennessee, Pace stating proudly: “My grandfather was a lieutenant in the Confederate army in Tennessee right where I live.”

Representative Wood: For your information, the gentleman who was interrogating you is also from Tennessee.

Representative Boyle: You see, Mr. Pace, he is trying to get across to you that the climate and atmosphere and high level of citizenship in Tennessee

would naturally contribute to your reformation.²⁵

Evidently, the Committee feels that Tennessee is so perfectly democratic that it provides a fine rehabilitation center for an ex-Communist.

Who has Been Attacked by the Committee?

What kinds of people have been attacked by the Committee? The lists of persons charged by the Committee with un-American affiliations and thoughts include labor leaders; famous scientists, including Dr. E. H. Condon and Professor Frank Oppenheimer; outstanding artists; and professional people. Even an outstanding member of so respected a party as the Republican Party was recently smeared by a member of the Committee, Representative Potter of Michigan. Newbold Morris, liberal Republican and former President of the New York City Council, was declared by Potter unfit for heading the Administration's

inquiry into corruption in government because he had been associated with allegedly Communist front organizations.²⁶

Among those cited for contempt of Congress by the Committee are some of the most creative artists in the film industry—men whose names may be less familiar than their works: *The Best Years of Our Lives*, *None But the Lonely Heart*, *Crossfire*, *The House I Live In*, *Home of the Brave*, *The Brotherhood of Man*, *Destination Tokyo*, and many others. A number of these same movies, especially those dealing with the evils of anti-Semitic and anti-Negro bigotry, were used as official training films by the Armed Forces during the Second World War.

But the list of people cited by the Committee for contempt only suggests the extent of the punishment meted out by the Committee. In its publications the Committee has listed the names of scores of respected persons whom it considers disloyal because of their ideas and convictions. These people, whose jobs are endangered and whose reputations are

impugned, are usually never even called before the Committee or given the opportunity of defending their beliefs. The Committee decides what are subversive organizations and by association alone brands as subversive those people who belong to such groups.

Among those whose names have thus been smeared are many illustrious academics, religious, and professional leaders. To name only a fraction of those listed: Professor Clifford Morgan, John Hopkins; Professors Kermit Eby, Robert J. Havighurts, Anton J. Carlson, Anatol Rapaport, and Rudolph Carnap, University of Chicago; Professor Kenneth Cameron, University of Indiana; Professor Edwin Bart, Cornell University; Professor Edgar S. Brightman, Boston University; Professor Dorothy W. Douglas, Smith College; Professor John De Boer, University of Illinois; Professor E. Franklin Frazier, Howard University; Professor Linus Pauling, California Institute of Technology; Professor Pitirim Sorokin, Harvard University; Professor Oswald Veblen, Institute for Advanced Studies, Princeton; Thomas Mann,

Artur Schnabel, Howard Fast, and Rockwell Kent. The list of Pulitzer and Nobel prize winners among the Committee's targets is impressive. Bishops, ministers, and rabbis are among the most commonly listed occupations.²⁷

Among the organizations whose members are disloyal, *a priori*, the Committee has listed the Book Find Club and Consumers Union.²⁸ The Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee, the National Committee to Defeat the Mundt Bill,²⁹ and, more recently, a peace committee in Baltimore³⁰ were attacked, not on the basis of overt criminal acts, but on the basis of their ideas, which the Committee claimed to be Communistic or supported by Communists.

The practice of listing organizations as subversive without a hearing has been declared illegal by the Supreme Court in the case of the Attorney General's list.³¹ The Court stated that it was not in accord with democratic principles to judge a group before a hearing had been held. If this is true of the Attorney General's list, is it any less true in the case of the Un-American Activities

Committee's list—more extensive and extreme in principle than that of the Attorney General?

The Committee's Contribution to American Life: Thought Purge and Inquisition

What has been the effect of the Committee's hearings? In Hollywood soon after the hearings on the film industry, the Association of Motion Picture Producers instituted a blacklist. The Association publicly stated that it would not rehire any of the persons cited for contempt by the Committee, and that it would "forthwith discharge or suspend without compensation those in our employ ... until such time as he is acquitted or has purged himself of contempt, and declared under oath that he is not a Communist." The Association deplored the absence of stronger laws to aid them in this work of purging subversive elements from private industry. "The absence of a national policy, established by Congress, with respect to the employment of Communists in private industry makes our task difficult. Ours is

a nation of laws. We request Congress to enact legislation to assist American industry to rid itself of subversive, disloyal elements.”³²

Many people, attacked by the Committee without the benefit of a hearing, have lost their jobs and professional standing. “Unfriendly” witnesses have suffered similarly. To cite only one example, Dr. Murray Abowitz, arthritis specialist for 14 years, was recently fired without warning, charges, or a hearing. Hospital spokesmen admitted in private that the firing was “political.” Dr. Abowitz had been uncooperative when called before the Committee on Un-American Activities last September.³³

Lawrence Duggan committed suicide after being smeared by the Committee. Harry Dexter White, suffering a heart attack in the course of being questioned by the Committee, died soon after his testimony. Actor J. Edward Bromberg, with a very serious heart condition, obtained a promise from the Committee that he would not be called until a Committee-appointed physician had examined him. The Committee failed to keep

its promise, and Mr. Bromberg was compelled to testify in June, 1951. He was so visibly ill that the Committee chairman commented on it.³⁴ Six months after his trying appearance, he died of a heart attack. (It is not without significance for the visit of the Committee to Michigan that Mr. Bromberg was subpoenaed while he was rehearsing for a stage role in Ann Arbor. Representative Potter, herald of the present visitation, made a point of having the subpoena served in Ann Arbor, and went to the trouble of attempting to arouse local veterans' groups to protest, under the erroneous notion that the University had officially engaged Mr. Bromberg.)

Perhaps the most serious indictment against the Committee, however, is that it has fostered the notion that Americanism is to be equated with conformity. As Professor Henry Steele Commager stated in his article on the Committee on Un-American Activities:

What is the new loyalty? It is, above all, conformity. It is the uncritical and unquestioning acceptance of America as it is—the political institutions, the

social relationships, the economic practices.

Who among American heroes could meet their tests, who could be cleared by their committees? Not Washington, who was a rebel. Not Jefferson, who wrote that all men are created equal, and whose motto was ‘rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God.’ ... Or Justice Holmes, who said that our Constitution is an experiment and that while that experiment is being made ‘we should be eternally vigilant against attempts to check the expression of opinions that we loathe and believe to be fraught with death.’³⁵

The Committee’s Plans for Ann Arbor

If the Committee should hold “investigations” at Michigan State and the University of Michigan, these will be their first

direct attempts to judge and exert control over the institutions of higher learning in this country. What can we expect from such hearings?

First, we can expect that the Committee will use the same tactics which they have employed elsewhere, and which Representative Eberharter (D., Penn) described to Congress as follows, in the course of arguing against the contempt citations of the Hollywood Ten: “These witnesses were placed on trial and denied the right to counsel. They were confronted by witnesses who were permitted to smear them with innuendo, suspicion, prejudice, and hearsay three or four times removed, and were not granted the right to cross-examine. Charges made against them carried full legal immunity to those making them; they were given national publicity. Yet the persons charged were not permitted to testify when they wanted to do so ...”³⁶

Second, we may expect that the Committee will pursue the ugliest and most dangerous of its more recent trends: the muddying of the distinction between political non-conformity and

espionage. A good deal of secret work is done at the University; at the same time there are in Ann Arbor a good many people whose views do not coincide with those of the Committee. The Committee will certainly do what it can to show that the two phenomena are related, since according to the Committee's allegations

It's every Communist's duty, even as a mechanical or office worker, to pick up any information around the plant he can lay hands on. Though he may not act under an organized spy ring, he can often turn up information which Moscow wants. This applies to Communists in the Government and anywhere else, too.³⁷

It should not be necessary to point out that the Committee will not be particularly scrupulous in determining whether its victims are or have ever been Communist Party members, since "the Party uses what it calls 'Fellow Travelers' and 'Front Organizations' in some of its most effective work."³⁸

Third, we can expect that many innocent people will be smeared and that the reputation of the University will suffer. As has been clearly demonstrated in the case of the University of California loyalty oaths, when university professors are judged not on the basis of competence but on the basis of toeing the line of orthodoxy in their personal beliefs, education suffers. There is no area of human endeavor which needs more the assurance of freedom from fear and intimidation than the instruction of young people in the pursuit of knowledge. Our universities must, if they are to produce sound thinkers able to judge values for themselves, be in fact as well as in theory free market places of ideas.

Here is What You Can Do to Prevent Thought Control in America

Urge any organization, living unit, or group to which you may belong to make public its opposition to the Committee's presence in this area. Write your Congressman similarly.

Promptness is important. The Committee is scheduled to open hearings in Detroit on February 25.

NOTES

1. *Investigation of Un-American Propaganda Activities in the United States*. Committee on Un-American Activities (Wash., 1938), Vol. 2, pp. 1286, 1492, 1495-1496.
2. *The Detroit News* (Oct. 21, 1938), p. 4, col. 5.
3. *Investigation of Un-American Propaganda Activities*, pp. 1277-1278.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 1297 ff..
5. *Ibid.*, p. 1299.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 1341.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 1295.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 1346.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 1331.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 1334.
11. *The Detroit News* (Oct. 26, 1938), p. 29, col. 3.
12. Gordon Kahn, *Hollywood on Trial* (N.Y., 1948), pp. 29, 176.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 29, 35, 29, 54, 58.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 69, 81, 94, 110.
15. 'Hearings Relating to Communist Activities in Defense Area of Baltimore,' *Hearings before the Committee on Un-American Activities* (Wash., 1951), part 2, p. 941.
16. Kahn, *Hollywood on Trial*, pp. 17-18.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
19. 'Hearings Relating to Communist Activities in Defense

- Area of Baltimore,' part 2, p. 918.
20. 'Communist Tactics among Veterans' Groups,' *Hearings before the Committee on Un-American Activities* (Wash., 1951), part 2, p. 1959.
 21. See voting record of House of Representatives, 81st Congress, 2nd Session.
 22. *Annual Report of the Committee on Un-American Activities for Year 1950* (Wash., 1951), pp. 25-27.
 23. Kahn, *Hollywood on Trial*, p. 22.
 24. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
 25. 'Communist Tactics among Veterans' Groups,' p. 1959.
 26. *New York Herald Tribune* (Feb. 4, 1952), pp. 1, 25.
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 36. Kahn, *Hollywood on Trial*, p. 161.
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 38. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

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Natalie Zemon Davis was a leading historian of early modern Europe, a pioneer in women's history, and a political activist. Her research focused on people often overlooked in historical writing—workers, women, Jews, Muslim border-crossers, and enslaved people in Suriname. She sought to recover their experiences “as if I were engaged in some rescue mission over and over.” Davis was the Henry Charles Lea Professor of History at Princeton University and Professor Emerita of History at the University of Toronto.

Elizabeth Douvan was a social psychologist who tracked the momentous mid-century changes in the American psyche through national surveys. Her pioneering research on the social and psychological condition of Americans before and after changes in the 1960s painted an intriguing portrait of shifts in American mental health, family life, the roles and status of women, and adolescent development and behavior. Douvan was the Catherine Neaffie Kellogg Professor of Psychology and Women's Studies at the University of Michigan.

THE INSTRUCTION OF HISTORY

ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN, MARCH 2025.

ALAN WALD

HAVE WE BEEN HERE BEFORE?

About the darkest chapters in US history, there is one thing we know with relative certainty: Once a period of political repression indisputably sets in, the situation gets only worse. The advent of such a dreadful era usually comes as a slope, not a switch, and preventative action may still have hopes of moderating the subsequent slide in the early stages. On the other hand, we also know that, when faced with a bully, what gets rewarded gets repeated; deference only teaches power just what it can get away with.

Yet even now, in the weeks following the 2025 presidential inauguration, many of our college and university colleagues exhibit a degree of murkiness in their assessment of

what the future will bring for the culture of academic freedom and free speech. Some are making concessions in our programs and policies, or even sacrificing those elements of our community who are most easily targeted. George Mason and Virginia Commonwealth University recently dropped DEI course requirements for graduation; many schools have eliminated DEI-type statements from websites; and so on. They imagine that this will satisfy rather than encourage the schoolyard bullies in the federal and state government, and in external conservative organizations; those who are making threats against our students and faculty.

After all, the initial events appeared more bonkers than devious calculation. King Trump ascended his throne surrounded by his royal family and a retinue of billionaire tech-bro courtiers. His first alarming act was to announce plans to rename mountains and seas (Mount Denali to Mount McKinley, the Gulf of Mexico to Gulf of America), and to seize territory belonging to other nations—Denmark and Panama. This

seemed as loopy and weird as it gets, stupid and evil at once. Surely, this guy is out of control and bound to make mistakes that will backfire, bolstering his opposition and creating divisions within his own camp.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to disconnect the antics of the new “brologarchy” from genuine perils enacted on university and college campuses in the year before Trump’s election and that continue to get worse. The reason is that one can find countless echoes of historical narratives that have played out before. History may not repeat, but it can instruct.

In this essay, I cannot examine academic freedom in the abstract; its import and defense are intertwined with the political issues being used by the federal and state governments, as well as pliant university administrators, to twist its meaning and destroy its efficacy. Moreover, I’m accentuating this historical aspect because I’m an academic specialist in dissident twentieth-century writers and intellectuals in the US—the ones who so often paid a heavy price in those dark chapters.

This has led me to be eternally haunted by the introductory paragraph of Fredric Jameson’s 1981 *The Political Unconscious*: “Always historicize!”¹

And when I historicize, I see a disturbing context for the current multi-front assault on academic freedom that became pronounced a year before Trump’s election—the repression against speech and action in protest of the US-enabled assault by the Israeli state on the people of Gaza. These various authoritarian offensives began under a liberal Democratic Party administration, but in 2025 Trump has resumed power at what may well be one of those turning points in world history.

Today we are looking at a US national shift to the Right that is part of a worldwide swing toward reactionary and religious nationalism (mostly Christian), a reshaping of the global order. This is not only in Europe (leaders such as Meloni in Italy, Orbán in Hungary, and Kickl in Austria, and organizations such as the National Rally Party in France and Alternative for Germany), but worldwide (Modi in India,

Bolsonaro in Brazil, Milei in Argentina, Bukele in El Salvador, Netanyahu in Israel).

Thus, it is imperative to add that, when Jameson began his book with that slogan, “always historicize,” he followed it by asserting that this watchword was itself a “transhistorical imperative.”² That is, there are patterns in the types of thinking and behavior that gain ascendancy following certain types of historical events. It’s fair to ask, have we been here before? Just as one can see a family resemblance between what is happening in the US and the evolution of an international Right, there are also signs of a similitude in academic thinking and behavior from earlier moments when our freedom to speak and teach critically came under attack.

THE LANDSCAPE OF REPRESSION

A quick review of some of the repressive acts against faculty since the fall of 2023 may help provide a perspective:

* Steve Thrasher, who holds a Chair of Social Justice at Northwestern University, had his

classes cancelled after he participated in an encampment demanding divestment from Israel in April 2024. He apparently collaborated in trying to set up a protective line between police and students and was therefore charged with obstructing an officer. Northwestern University has announced that it plans to investigate his social media as well.³

*Richard Heyman, a longtime Lecturer at the University of Texas at Austin was fired by email after police charged him with shouting expletives at a protest and gesturing in a threatening way with his water bottle.⁴

*Ruha Benjamin, a professor of African American Studies and a MacArthur Fellow at Princeton University, is being investigated for her pro-Palestine activism.⁵

*Katherine Franke, a distinguished Columbia Unity Law professor, was forced to leave her position following an investigation sparked by comments she made on *Democracy Now!*. In an interview, she expressed concerns about harassment of pro-Palestine activists by former Israeli soldiers studying at Columbia.⁶

*Tiffany Willoughby-Herard, a University of California at Irvine Professor of Global and International studies, was charged with three misdemeanor counts, including allegedly resisting arrest at the time of a pro-Palestine protest in May 2024.⁷

*Professor Michel DeGraff, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has received letters of reprimand and a pay raise has been withheld after a dispute with his department over his request in December 2023 to teach a course on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.⁸

*Justice Studies professor Sang Hea Kil, at San José State University in California, has been suspended since May 2024 for her involvement as an adviser to pro-Palestinian student groups on campus, with an investigation that could result in termination. She is accused of “directing and encouraging students” to violate university policies and “engaging in harassing and offensive conduct and comments directed towards colleagues.”⁹

*Maura Finkelstein, a tenured chair of the Anthropology Department at Muhlenberg

College in New Jersey, was fired in May 2024 due to social media posts about Zionism that were deemed offensive to Jews.¹⁰

What we can see is that campus administrators are focused on carrying out repression against pro-Palestinian activism in several ways. One is to institute new restrictions on campus protests, rules not previously enforced or even on the books. Another is to feed whatever forms of faculty and student consultation had existed on the campus to the woodchipper. A third, and the most dangerous, is to carry out punishments and even dismissals by claiming that the administration is protecting the “safety” of Jewish students.¹¹

FALSE CONFLATIONS

This last deception is engineered under Civil Rights Act Title VI. The strategy is to treat outspoken anti-Zionist opinions—especially certain slogans, phrases, and ideas—as antisemitic discrimination against a supposed “protected class” due to race, color, or national origin. The

allegation is that the “anti-Zionism” in one’s statement or slogan is not understood to be the targeting of an ideology or state policy, which is normally the intention. Rather, it is alleged to be aimed at harassing a “protected class” of students’ “national origins.”

This key phrase, “national origins,” roughly refers to one’s country of birth or ancestry as well as physical, cultural, or linguistic characteristics. The deception, then, is to act as if the political ideology of “Zionism” actually denotes anyone Jewish, even though most Zionists in the US are not Jews—they are Christian Zionists, by far. And all Jews are not Zionists.

Nevertheless, by weaponization of this false conflation (Zionist=Jew), an extortion scheme becomes operable. If a university fails to act against violations of Title VI (i.e., in response to claims of harassment and a hostile environment aimed at a protected class), it can be punished by losing millions of dollars of federal funding. This means that, when politicians want to neutralize a campus where there has been progressive political activity, there is a financial motivation for

university administrations to find new methods for disciplining people in order to dodge losing their funding under Title VI.

Moreover, many of the alleged Title VI violations that have received attention are based on complaints about the personal social media of faculty, customarily seen as extramural speech with First Amendment rights. What's happening is that individuals and organizations (sometimes outsiders, sometimes students) are monitoring accounts of suspected faculty, often searching for political ammunition. They then report to university administrators that the content observed makes them feel emotionally uncomfortable and anxious. This enables an accusation that the professor's speech or writing (extramural or intramural) negatively impacts a student's access to education.

Additional alleged violations ascribed to pro-Palestinian faculty are attributed to distorted characterizations of assigned course readings and topics that might be used in a classroom. One supposed "antisemitic" critique is the assessment of the Palestine/Israel historical conflict through

the framework of a variant of colonialism known as “settler-colonialism.”¹² This is falsely represented by supporters of the Israeli state as a call for annihilation of the Jewish population.¹³

Another critique, decried as “antisemitic,” rejects the present-day Israeli state form as a lawful type of self-determination—not because of an objection to self-determination by a state that is Jewish, but because authentic self-determination does not mean displacing the majority of an indigenous population and instituting apartheid. Thus, when anti-Zionists argue for the normalization of the Israeli state into a modern, pluralistic democracy, pro-Zionists experience the equivalent of an anaphylactic reaction because they imagine that they hear only “the destruction of the Jewish state.” Too often they are simply fighting an anti-Zionism of their own creation. Nevertheless, the major spokespersons for the anti-Zionist Left have made it clear from the get-go that it is not “destruction” that is the goal but creating state forms with equality and not ethnic supremacy.

NAMING THE SYSTEM

The evidence shows that those protests and scholarly approaches that deeply contest the Zionist and pro-Israel position—especially ones indicating that current events are not an aberration but a realization of Zionism—are the ones being proscribed as “antisemitic.” The object is to make this alternative understanding of this history taboo. What is often being promoted instead are variations of the view that the bloodshed in Israel is a product of the centuries-old “longest hatred” of Jews, as well as a furtherance of Holocaust antisemitism. Still, whether scholars like it or not, there is a need to name colonial subjugation, and understand its implications. At this moment a more sophisticated version of settler colonialism seems the most accurate way to clarify the challenge we face as one of achieving equal coexistence through the abolition of Jewish colonial privilege.

Even worse, reducing the matter to Jew-hatred creates a frame of mind leading to an

exaggeration of one's discomfort so that a pro-Zionist will perceive strident criticisms of the Israeli state as imperiling to Jews as Jews. Unclear chants ("From the River to the Sea"), symbols of solidarity (Palestinian flags, keffiyehs), and unfamiliar language ("intifada," which means "shaking off") are inaccurately processed as menacing intimidation. Yes, some might favor alternative approaches to educating the public that don't involve waving flags or using terms that can be easily misrepresented, but none of these chants and icons meet the standard of actionable "hate speech" or can qualify as punishable unless they are combined with an imminent threat of physical harm.

There are certainly other problematic issues at work in the evolving university culture beyond what I am citing. Some scholars have charged that higher education is becoming more of essentially a "money-making, MBA, lawyer-run, hedge fund-cum-real estate operation," with a minor sideline in quality teaching and research.¹⁴ But there is no doubt that the type of political

repression described above is at the forefront of the assault on academic freedom and free speech as we go deeper into 2025.

On the one hand, the Trump administration has launched investigations through the Department of Education into a group of universities on the grounds that “widespread antisemitic harassment has been reported.” This is surely intended to frighten faculty and administrators across the country. They fear that they will lose billions of dollars in federal funding if they do not demonstrate compliance by cracking down with even more draconian measures against speech and protest around Palestine.¹⁵ At the same time, the Trump regime’s attack on DEI (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion) is also under way, with the claim that promotion of antisemitism has been part of DEI’s activity through bolstering education around racism and colonialism.¹⁶

One of the most disturbing cases of university compliance with this outrageous amalgamation of DEI and alleged antisemitism

occurred at the University of Michigan (U-M), which is a microcosm of many of the challenging issues. This is the firing of the former head of the office of U-M Multicultural Academic Initiatives in the DEI office, the African American attorney Rachel Dawson. Without evidence, she was accused of saying words to the effect that U-M is “controlled by wealthy Jews,” when she was confronted with questions about DEI policies toward Jews by two women from another institution. The women then complained to the Anti-Defamation League, notorious for its conflating of anti-Zionism with antisemitism, which in turn contacted U-M officials. Despite Dawson’s quite credible denial (she had no record of similar remarks in seven years at U-M), and an outside law firm’s investigation affirming that no documentation existed for such comments, Dawson was terminated at the demand of a wealthy Regent.¹⁷ Here we see that a selective claim about a certain political matter is treated as “proof,” and reasonable policies and procedures for determining guilt and innocence are

peremptorily trampled underfoot by economic and political power. Somewhere, the Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt is smiling.

REITERATIONS FROM THE PAST

Where then, can we find the most pertinent reiterations from the past in the present political repression at colleges and universities? One possibility is to consider the “Culture Wars” that exploded in the early 1990s. Today’s Trump administration is alleging that so-called campus “Wokeness” and “social justice warriors” are the main cause of alleged antisemitism and abuses by DEI, and this smear is being perpetrated in a manner strikingly similar to the earlier focus on “Political Correctness” (often abbreviated as “P.C.” and referring to multiculturalism, feminism, etc.). At that time, thirty years ago, quick and forceful faculty resistance contributed to successfully staving off a full-scale escalation to more acute repression by responding.

For example, when President George H. W. Bush gave a 1991 commencement speech at U-M denouncing “censorship” and “bullying” by campus radicals,¹⁸ the campus reacted with the nationally noted teach-in called, “The P.C. Frame-Up: What’s Behind the Attack?” Faculty member Richard Campbell led the way in making the strategic decision to invite widely known critics to the campus to debate face-to-face in a huge public forum, with the result that U-M was at the head of what the *New York Times* called “the counter-offensive.”¹⁹

Moreover, many faculty joined a national organization, Teachers for a Democratic Culture, and locally a campus-wide U-M Network for Cultural Democracy was formed. Also in response, in 1992-93 the U-M Program in American Culture (now Department) sponsored two connected university-wide “Theme Semesters” designed to strengthen scholarly reach and diversity in the face of this assault: “Working in a Multicultural Society” and “The Americas Then and Now: Beyond 1492.” Such efforts climaxed in the cluster-hiring of new faculty that

instituted full-fledged Ethnic Studies Programs and the transformation of American Culture into a large department that further enhanced the culture and composition of the U-M faculty.

The comparison with the 1990s is not as exact as the repression at universities in the post-World War II era, popularly known as “McCarthyism.” The context at that time was the decline of New Deal politics set off against the rise of Cold War reaction. And the context today is the legacy of post-2008 activism on behalf of millennial socialism, occupy, Trans Rights, Black Lives Matter, and Palestinian Solidarity, set off against the rise of the new international Right.

The pattern of academic repression is disturbingly similar. First, in the 1950s, the Federal government took the initiative by sending agents to universities and threatening them with consequences if they didn’t “clean up their house.” Then, the university administrators announced that they would defend academic freedom and free speech from Communist conspirators by firing those who didn’t co-operate in public Congressional hearings.

Today we see the same pre-capitulation and anticipatory obedience playbook—handing over power before one has to. The Federal government started things off with threats, hauling elite college presidents before Congress in late 2023. Immediately afterwards, the university administrations barreled ahead to “clean house”—leaving Trump to simply kick down an open door in 2025.

Also, similar then and now, is the weaponization of key terms of demonization. A “Communist” in the 1950s became a free-floating signifier to mean an agent of Stalin, conspirator, potential spy, disloyal citizen—even if the targeted faculty had only signed some petitions or had actually separated from the Communist Party years before. Today, a targeted “antisemite” refers to all sorts of critics of Zionism, including religious Jews, who supposedly create a hostile environment violating Title VI.

Of course, there’s no doubt that actual Jew-hatred is growing in the West and must be stamped out. But it debilitates that fight if one redefines “antisemite” as synonymous with

criticism of a supremacist ideology and its ethno-state political form. Thus, when it comes to most accusations of “Left antisemitism,” we have a mix of gross oversimplification, cherry picking, and personal interpretation presented as fact—all enabling genocide denialists to commit definitional theft.

It’s truly painful to see so many so-called “liberals” voicing the same kind of defamatory distortions—that anti-Zionism is antisemitism and that the protests are pro-Hamas controlled—that have helped to propel Trump and his henchmen into power. They imagine that equating the anti-Zionist protests with antisemitism and punishing protestors will result in some temporary political advantage, but in this instance, they are giving the vital label “antisemitism” about the same valence as the label “terrorist” had under the Assad regime in Syria. Those with consciences may have to spend the rest of their lives avoiding mirrors; others, covering up a sordid past, may have to have their knees surgically unbent.

GOING AFTER BIGGER FISH

What is also analogous between the 1950s and today is that the assaults on “communists” and “antisemites” are pretexts for going after bigger fish. The 1950s witch-hunters had two aims. First, frighten and discipline the entire campus—and the broader public—to accept the Cold War strategy of the United States, with silence and self-censorship ruling the academic culture. Second, to use the “Communism” issue—like the antisemitism issue today—to beat back existing radical movements as a whole. In the late 40s, these were the burgeoning postwar labor and civil rights movements, and the forward push of women to continue the independent role assumed during the home front of WWII.

Today, the larger aim seems to be to destroy the gains of DEI, Trans Rights, immigrant rights, progressive unions, women’s control of their bodies, the environmental movement, and similar social justice causes. One could say much more about similarities. Then and now there are incentives for snitching and blacklisting. Over

the past year, university students were coached to file Title VI complaints; professors were doxed on websites like *Canary Mission*; and the Trump administration warned federal employees to report DEI “activists” or face the “consequences.” Then and now we see that the publication of names of accused is a common tactic—*Red Channels* in the 1950s, *Stop Antisemitism* in the 2020s. There is also a parallel in the production of books elaborating on the conspiracy thinking behind the persecutions—in the McCarthy era it was J. Edgar Hoover’s *Masters of Deceit* [1958], in the Trump era it is the Heritage Foundation’s *Project Esther: A National Strategy to Combat Antisemitism* (2024).

None of this is to suggest that Communist supporters in the 1950s had an accurate view of the world situation, any more than one should imagine that Team Palestine and Team DEI are perfect today. Dissident movements are comprised of humans with palpable flaws; most produce individuals and factions who say and do counter-productive or even just dumb things, but that hardly invalidates their cause. What is central

to remember is that the firings in the 1950s had nothing to do with the quality of teaching and scholarship, and the witch-hunt today is based on a biased and selective targeting of a specific form of political critique.

Nor should we neglect important differences in the events of the two repressions. For example, in the 1950s, one's classroom conduct and research agenda were irrelevant to the judgment passed. Behavior unacceptable for a professor was initially defined simply as one-time association with the Communist Party. Then, at the Congressional and state-sponsored hearings, objectionable conduct was expanded to include any refusal to cooperate in the witch hunt by informing on suspected Communists. Of course, there was much talk of conspiracy and espionage, but such activity was never proven regarding any faculty.

This differs from today, where accusations of unacceptable behavior involve public statements made (often on social media), indoctrinating students to “woke” or “liberal” ways of thinking, the creation of a hostile

environment, using course syllabi deemed inappropriate because they discuss settler colonialism, critical race theory, “gender ideology,” etc., or even activism in connection with a pro-Palestinian protest. Another contrast is that the post-war persecution allowed an unappealing but available escape hatch. Self-revelation (admitting one’s own past CP-USA involvement) alone was not enough, but one could prove that one no longer held Communist views by naming people once affiliated and getting them in trouble. Today, some of those targeted for making allegedly unacceptable remarks have tried to remove the “offending” Instagram and other social media posts and may have even apologized by saying that they didn’t mean what was being attributed to them. But it’s not at all clear that this will get them off the hook.

We need to be candid about what we might expect as we recall the process by which the 1950s witch hunt evolved. Then, the state’s investigating committees identified its targets on campus, and then the university administrators themselves took over, searching out assorted

ways to divest themselves of these faculty. Most important, faculty sentiment against the purges was passionate at the start. It was the relentless determination on the part of regents, trustees, and administrators that broke the will of those university faculties. A prominent illustration is what occurred in the University of California system, where fifty per cent of the faculty refused to sign the loyalty oath when it was adopted in 1949, even though noncompliance threatened one's employment for the following year.

Many leading scholars on the UC campuses rallied to the principle that the state Regents had no right to interfere with tenure and faculty self-determination. Yet, at the end of a long series of compromises, hearings, and modifications in the oath, developing divisions among the nonsigners reduced those resisting to a helpless handful. Of course, the victims themselves sometimes inadvertently assisted in their own victimization. Some resigned quietly when they came under attack, in the hope that a lack of publicity would enable them to find future employment.

WINNING A MAJORITY

What can we learn to prevent the kind of full-scale rout that occurred in the 1950s? Obviously, there shouldn't be pre-capitulation. Rather, we must find unity and a means to win over a majority. For that, there are two main and somewhat distinct routes. One is to fight repression by creating a greater understanding of the politics of the social movement being demonized. We can start by refusing to be the characters that the Right and pro-Zionists are fabricating, the ones who are making these supposed "antisemitic" statements that they are claiming that we say. To be clear, only a small number of people are saying ambiguous things but the pro-Zionists give these an unfounded meaning and then claim that they are widespread views. This fiction allows them to fight an "anti-Zionism" of their own creation.

If people really understood what Zionism looks like from the standpoint of its victims, and what is actually happening in the Middle East, we might achieve a counter-hegemonic shifting

of public opinion as we did on Civil Rights, Vietnam, South Africa, and gay marriage. This means that there are responsibilities on the part of those actively supporting the causes under attack, especially the hot-button issue of stopping the genocide against Palestinians. If one is committed to getting the US and Israel off the backs of the Palestinians, one's views must be put forward in a frank, non-arrogant way.

Most students, not to mention faculty and the public, have no understanding of the history and political practice of Zionism in the colonial world, often basing their perspective on Zionism as a reasonable response to European antisemitism. Yet the genuine and horrific past oppression of Jews—or any other group—cannot be used as an excuse for present-day violations of human rights on a grand scale. To explain this with facts, we must make full use of teach-ins, op-eds, pamphlets, ZOOM classes, radio and TV interviews, boycotts, community meetings, dorm discussions, debates, and militant but non-violent sit-ins, die-ins, intelligent disruptions, and civil disobedience. What is more, we cannot abandon

academic courses that treat these issues with thoughtful complexity.

That means creating environments where Palestinian voices can be heard and serious scholarly work from all angles—on the region and on varieties of racism, including antisemitism—can be assessed and understood. This is accomplished by imparting and comparing critical tools. If a university actually forbids these kinds of classes, we should follow our predecessors by setting up our own uncensored Freedom Schools off campus in churches and union halls. If we don't use what political freedom we have, we will surely lose it. We can't let pre-capitulation steal our future.

The other route to defending university culture is the academic freedom campaign itself—advocating the right to hold and express our opinions, including the right to demonstrate without being pepper-strayed or roughed up by campus police. Here, we can ally with people who don't agree with us on Palestine, or even DEI—but who support our rights. Of course, that won't happen if we shame them for not going all

the way with us and failing to pass purity tests apropos particular beliefs. Partisans in support of Palestinian self-determination will not build alliances or even a sizable movement if they treat as a traitor those who don't line up with their specific analyses of exactly how one supports the right of resistance.

Moreover, for academic freedom and freedom of speech, there needs to be clarity about legal precedents and traditions, although nothing is simple. As is commonly explained, academic freedom is a privilege of faculty self-governance that was justified on the grounds that warding off outside interference is necessary to serve the mission of the university. It applies only to professors, and it protects qualified scholars' speech and their power to regulate the speech of others in their field. It's considered a constitutionally protected right in the United States, primarily under the First Amendment's guarantee of freedom of speech.

Considering the ambiguities and possibilities for various interpretations, academic freedom and free speech must be defended

through public debate and also legal action. Fortunately, we now have the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) on our side—which was not the case in the 50s. In addition, on many campuses there are Faculty Senates and similar organizations committed to varieties of Shared Faculty Governance. This is a process that involves faculty and other stakeholders in decision-making and policy development.²⁰

Nevertheless, if there is a priority at present, it is to address forthrightly the current mechanisms of repression, especially the abuse of Title VI and the weaponization of the charge of antisemitism in relation to anti-Zionism. But there is also the institution of new rules and policies regarding protests (such as rigidly applied time and place restrictions). These were never used before. And in Florida, North Texas, and other places, there are increasing surveillances of course titles and syllabi. Defamatory labels are being used to marginalize and muzzle activists with definitions that would be judged worthless in any serious analysis. If this isn't bullying,

nothing is. So, what are the most accurate and effective ways to address Zionism, anti-Zionism and antisemitism?

CLARIFYING THE LEXICON

In order to understand the critical role played by such false and dangerous misdefinitions, those opposing the new attack on academic freedom must refute them and offer better alternatives. Informed individuals know that anti-Zionism means criticizing a political ideology and a state, not a people and their religion. Yet pro-Zionists and the Right have introduced a widespread new terminological lexicon that would make George Orwell blush. For starters, there are now “problematic” words that can get one in trouble with political watchdogs of the Trump administration: equity, gender, transgender, intersectionality, multiculturalism, and so on. Racial justice is being redefined as anti-white racism. Having “merit” is now a code word for being loyal to the president. On top of this, we are seeing a resurgence of the same habits of mind

that characterized 1950s McCarthyism—false and exaggerated stories, wildly amplified and repeated. In this atmosphere, how can we define already complicated topics?

Customarily, antisemitism has been designated as Jew-hatred, commonly in the form of a racist conspiracy theory since the 1894 Dreyfus case. The reference to Jews, of course, is to adherents of an ancient monotheistic religion, not people with certain physical characteristics or necessarily residing in one location. Sometimes we simply know antisemitism when we see it—such as the expression “Jew down,” a derogatory epithet rooted in the false stereotype that Jews are cheap or stingy and connecting Jewish people with bargaining, and the phrase ZOG, an acronym for “Zionist Occupied Government,” which reflects the common white supremacist belief that the US government is controlled by a Jewish cabal. But often we must think and ask questions before making an accusation.

One might ask, does a statement promote the idea of a world Jewish conspiracy or control over governments, media, banks, or other

institutions? Does an argument employ sick inventions such as the so-called Blood Libel? Does a remark belittle the number of Jews murdered in the Holocaust? Does a slogan encourage violence against Jews as Jews or Jewish institutions because they are Jewish? Does an opinion involve menacing someone because they are visibly identifiable as Jewish; attacking a synagogue or identifiable Jewish institution because it is a Jewish space? Does a policy discriminate against Jews—because they are Jewish—by social exclusion or the denial of equal rights, or by subjecting them to profiling or disproportionate scrutiny?

Zionism and anti-Zionism might be best understood in relation to each other. The former is not a theology or ethnicity but a political project of state-making that advantages Jews (a “Jewish state”). This means that today’s anti-Zionists are those standing in resistance to such a state if it discriminates against non-Jews—but emphatically not against Jews themselves or the Jewish religion.

At the same time, being simply *anti-Zionist* may not explain a person or movement’s

whole politics; there is also the matter of what one is *for*. Most in the US anti-Zionist movement are for a democratic state for all, although some think that two states or federations can provide equal rights across the board. On the other hand, if one is for a Jew-free region in Palestine, there's certainly a plausible case for being charged with antisemitism. Although the Old Testament is not a reliable historical source, a small number of Jews have existed there for centuries, and the Jewish religion expresses an attachment and even a desire for a post-Messianic return to Jerusalem.

The point is that the history of Zionism is critical to understanding why anti-Zionism is not itself antisemitic, and it must be carefully explained because there is much confusion about it. Screaming that “Zionism is racism” and “Zionism is fascism” won't change minds—it will only harden opinions. Although a reasonable discussion may not always be possible, it has a better chance of reaching people if one's goal is to counter those who seek to erase the distinction between Judaism and Zionism in people's minds.

Those who are presently denouncing the anti-Zionist critics who call out the Israeli state's genocide and racism as “antisemites,” are mainly seeking a polemical weapon to drown out the screams of Zionism's victims. They prefer a Manichean narrative, pitting Jews as “eternal victims” against the depraved evil of “jihadists,” and promoting a hallucinatory fever dream of a Hamas-led terror network across US campuses. This is how they make the case for university censorship and viewpoint discrimination. In distinction, anti-Zionists don't mince words about the oppression of Palestinians, while categorically defending the Jewish right to equality—just not supremacy.

In this debate, it is clear that Jewish anti-Zionists can play a special role in clarifying the distinction between antisemitism and anti-Zionism, as well as exposing the pernicious role played by the majority of Christian Zionists. Like the European Right, Reverend John Hagee, Mike Huckabee, and others cover their antisemitism by preaching support of Israel. Yet their real interest

in promoting a Zionist land grab is that it is a step toward the Second Coming—and the end of all things Jewish. The main antisemitic danger in the US still emanates from traditional white supremacy, which must be countered, too. These two fights—against Zionism and against Right-wing Jew hatred—need to be combined.

Moreover, it's not surprising that a growing number of young Jews, inspired by an honorable tradition full of ethics and universalism, would not *only* be shaken by the atrocities committed on October 7. Having been once indoctrinated with falsehoods about the character of the Zionist state, they are additionally being moved to rage and mass protests when seeing what followed as that state carried out an indiscriminate revenge on the population of Gaza in the name of the Jewish people. Israel has appalled the world with its lies about human shields, and the horror of Israeli state actions will echo for generations along with the war crimes of the US in Vietnam and the abominations of South Africa's apartheid regime.

Adding insult to injury, the hue and cry on campuses about "Jewish safety" is only going

to backfire among the best and the brightest of this generation. Many Jewish faculty, students, and staff will not stand by and watch the punishing, silencing, and even beating of Palestinians, African Americans, and other students in the name of keeping Jews safe. And this is not even to mention the absurdity of “protecting” Jewish students by suspending a Jewish students’ organization, such as Columbia University’s punishment of the Columbia-Barnard Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) chapter and Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) on November 10, 2023.

We know that by trying to change the conversation away from the facts of the Gaza situation to the allegedly antisemitic motives of anti-Zionist critics of the Israeli state, the pro-Israel forces are simply revealing an awareness that their case is weak. And let’s be clear about what a reliance on Title VI and government enforcement will do to academic freedom: Instead of allowing faculty to debate what ideas should be included in general education, they are placing the power to censor in the hands of partisan legislators, donors, and parents.

WHAT STRATEGIES WILL ADVANCE OUR GOALS?

What worries me most about the parallels between today and the 1950s, is that we have seemed to have learned so little from past experience. To be sure, some committed faculty are doing their best to fight back—mainly through the circulation of supporting petitions for those maltreated; public meetings and teach-ins; witnessing and sometimes joining in demonstrations. Yet what we have seen from college presidents at the Congressional Hearings last year is setting the dominant tone. Some are calling it “Mad Surrender Disease.”

Yet we have to take advantage of the reality that there is actually a foundation here for a majority alliance of people at many universities with unions and other elements of the community. What is required is that we must formulate broad demands that unify, and stay off the button-pushing, provoking, shaming and self-righteous stuff. All it takes is for one unhinged provocateur to cry “Zio bitch!” or raise a sign

reading “Israel deserves 10,000 October 7ths,” and the *New York Times* publishes major opinion essays read by millions.²¹ Meanwhile, a Faculty and Staff for Justice in Palestine group of hundreds can work on a well-crafted and thoughtful statement for weeks that goes unnoticed.

Collective action is usually the most effective way to go, building local and national Palestine Justice organizations that collaborate with students and staff. Of course, as already indicated, defending academic integrity and autonomy is a battle that will have to be waged on at least two fronts: one to defend academic freedom and the other to clarify the social justice movements. Regarding campus repression, especially for Palestine speech, we need a national organization that can mobilize hundreds of thousands of people in the streets to make clear-cut and easily understood political demands on the US government as well as on institutions with investments in the Israeli State. We need to promote BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) and education to explain what antisemitism actually is (and the growing Right-wing

antisemitic danger). We also need a national clearing house of lawyers to defend victims of repression and organize defense committees, groups like Palestine Legal and the ACLU. In regard to global dimensions of various issues, we need to promote link-ups with parallel movements and co-thinkers around the world.

Using American colleges and universities as a case study, scholars have argued that anything short of militant rejection of the witch hunt in the 1950s only served as grist for the rationalization-producing mills that enabled administrators to persecute faculty.²² This includes purging Leftists in the name of “academic freedom,” facilitated by Sidney Hook’s influential *Hersey Yes, Conspiracy No* (1953), which claimed that a pro-Communist was incapable of upholding the principles of independent inquiry. Then, as we see now, at each step, most universities slavishly followed the pressure from the Right, quickly and shamelessly abandoning any legitimate claim to being havens for dissent. The echoes of this past are now deafening.

NOTES

1. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 9.
2. Ibid., p. 9.
3. See <https://dailynorthwestern.com/2024/09/11/campus/medill-investigates-professor-who-participated-in-pro-palestine-encampment-cancels-his-classes/>
4. See <https://www.austinchronicle.com/news/2024-05-17/ut-professor-rich-heyman-fired-after-arrest-at-pro-palestine-protest/>
5. See <https://www.chronicle.com/article/princeton-touted-a-professors-macarthur-award-while-also-investigating-her-pro-palestinian-advocacy?sra=true>
6. See <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/jan/13/pro-palestine-columbia-professor-katherine-franke>
7. See <https://laist.com/news/criminal-justice/charges-filed-against-uc-irvine-students-and-professors-who-took-part-in-protests>
8. See <https://www.chronicle.com/article/a-curricular-clash-at-mit>
9. See <https://jweekly.com/2024/05/28/san-jose-state-professor-says-she-was-suspended-for-pro-palestinian-activism/>

10. See <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/faculty-issues/academic-freedom/2024/09/27/tenured-jewish-prof-says-shes-fired-pro-palestine>
11. See <https://religiondispatches.org/trumps-eo-to-combat-antisemitism-wields-jewish-safety-as-a-weapon-to-crush-palestine-solidarity/> and <https://www.columbiaspectator.com/opinion/2025/02/07/protecting-our-university-from-trumps-cruel-agenda-means-resisting-his-instrumentalization-of-antisemitism/>
12. Unlike metropole colonialism, where a parent state exercises direct control over a colony or empire, settler-colonialism takes land and resources from an indigenous people with the aim of displacing them by settlers.
13. Of course, Columbia Professor Rashid Khalidi, the most popular explicator of the settler-colonial framework, plainly does not advocate any kind of expulsionism or eliminationism of Jews. As he clearly states in his most famous book: “There are now two peoples in Palestine, irrespective of how they came into being, and the conflict between them cannot be resolved as long as the national existence of each is denied by the other. Their mutual acceptance can only be based on complete equality of rights, including national rights, notwithstanding the crucial historical differences between the two.” This quote from *The Hundred Years War on Palestine* (2017) has been widely circulated; see, for example, “How Israelis

- and Palestinians Can Make a one-State Solution Work”: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-how-israelis-and-palestinians-can-make-a-one-state-solution-work>. This is not to suggest that violence can be ruled out in the anti-colonial process, only that it must be minimized as much as possible. As Palestinian scholar Tareq Baconi points out: “Ultimately, decolonization, if it is to be effective, is not going to be grounded in bloodletting and killing of civilians. It’s going to be a process that’s focused on dismantling a structure of oppression.” See: <https://jacobin.com/2023/11/hamas-israel-palestine-gaza-history-decolonization-violence>. While many facts are not known about the events of 7 October 2023, and Israel has promoted lies about beheadings and systematic rape, the reports of human rights organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and B’Tselem should be taken seriously.
14. See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2024/oct/08/rashid-khalidi-palestine-israel-scholar-columbia-university-retires>.
 15. See <https://academeblog.org/2025/02/04/doe-announces-investigations-of-five-campuses/>
 16. See <https://www.vox.com/24010858/republicans-antisemitism-dei-diversity-equity-inclusion-jewish-students>
 17. See <https://facultysenate.umich.edu/sacua-letter-re-dawson-termination-regental-overreach/>

18. See <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-university-michigan-commencement-ceremony-ann-arbor>
19. See <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/09/25/education/in-campus-debate-on-new-orthodoxy-a-counteroffensive.html>
20. See <https://www.aaup.org/programs/shared-governance/faqs-shared-governance>
21. See <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/01/opinion/jewish-women-misogyny-antisemitism.html> and <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/20/opinion/hamas-colleges-free-speech.html>
22. The most eminent scholar is Ellen Schrecker, author of *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities* (1986) and many other books.

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EPILOGUE AND CALL TO ACTION

ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN, JANUARY 2025.

REBEKAH MODRAK

In 2021, a high school teacher in Florida is fired for hanging a Black Lives Matter flag over her classroom door. A New Jersey public school librarian learns that she has been terminated for celebrating Hispanic Heritage, Women’s History, Black History, and Neurodiversity in book displays. At a public library board meeting in Louisiana, a librarian defends users’ First Amendment rights to access books on all topics, and condemns book censors for targeting authors who are people of color and/or LGBTQ+. In return, she is slandered as a “pedophile” on social media. The Rainbow flag and Progress Pride flag are displayed in a high school math class until a few students complain that their presence makes them “uncomfortable”; their Long Island school

district issues a directive banning all “political” flags except the U.S. and state flags, which, apparently, are apolitical.

University of Florida officials prohibit three political science professors from testifying as expert witnesses in a voting rights lawsuit against Florida Governor Ron DeSantis’ administration. DeSantis signs a law requiring state schools to survey the political affiliations of teaching staff. PEN America reports over 1,586 book bans, mostly volumes featuring non-White, non-Christian, and nonheterosexual characters. In an act of psychological intimidation, the right-wing *Daily Wire* posts teachers’ names and addresses online because educators had the audacity to pledge to “Teach the Truth” about U.S. history—namely that the country “was founded on dispossession of Native Americans, slavery, structural racism and oppression.” In February 2025, a barrage of executive orders from the Trump administration redefining DEI work as “illegal discrimination” emboldens the vigilante website DEI Watch List to threaten federal health workers, mainly Black and Latine, by publishing their images and names

online; Deiwatchlist.com, funded by the far-right Conservative Partnership Institute, is described by the *New York Times* as a "breeding ground for the next generation of Trump loyalists."

And so, the fight to control information and speech continues in the present day. The contemporary "operation mind" employs similar intimidation tactics: the administration of loyalty oaths, the publication of lists of names, the use of smear campaigns.

During the current moment of dread and despair, Davis and Douvan's *Operation Mind* offers a body of evidence about state repression, a prophetic warning, and a call to action about the necessity and urgency of doing all we can to prevent thought control in America. Davis advises: "I realized that between heroic resistance to and fatalistic acceptance of oppression, there was ample space for coping strategies and creative improvisation." Use available resources. Read, research, document, and log conditions in print. Find friends and colleagues to collaborate. Distribute ideas deemed dangerous by those in power.

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