

The Inaugural Academy of Scholars Lecture in the Arts
and Humanities, in Honor of Guy Stern

**HARNESSING VIRTUE IN THE SERVICE OF CRUELTY:
BELIEF, DELUSION, AND RACE IN NAZI GERMANY**

Claudia Koonz

Peabody Family Distinguished Professor Emeritus of History
in Trinity College of Arts and Sciences, Duke University
author of *The Nazi Conscience* (Harvard University Press)

Friday, April 7, 3:00–4:30 PM
Shaver Music Recital Hall
Old Main Building, Wayne State University
480 West Hancock, Detroit (enter West Hancock)

In her capacious study of the cultural politics of the Nazi state, Claudia Koonz elucidates the multiple and reinforcing discourses of virtue that turned positive ideals into catastrophic cruelty, albeit coordinated by the Führer’s galvanizing rhetoric. “Although it may strain credulity to conceive of Adolf Hitler as a prophet of virtue,” she writes, “therein lay the secret of his immense popularity.” Unlike other politicians, who debated policy, Hitler preached values. In her lecture, Koonz will explore Hitler’s appeals to ethnic virtue as a “positive” ideal drawn from pseudo-religious traditions and imagined victimhood. Beginning with a little-known auto-hagiography Hitler wrote before *Mein Kampf*, she explores the Christ-like imagery in his prophecy of redemption for “Aryan” Germans—who were on his account the decent people who had endured betrayal, scorn, and humiliation. Although later he expunged Biblical references, Hitler’s command for loyalists to sacrifice “individual greed” for “communal need” remained the mainstay of his rhetoric—and of gigantic national programs in the Third Reich. As Nazi loyalists restored the lost honor of their *Volk*, their moral rectitude eased their consciences as they canceled Jews and other “unwanted” categories of people from their sense of moral obligation. In framing the catastrophe, Koonz examines the impact of Nazi persuasive media designed to foster what social scientists term “ingroup love” as well as “outgroup hate.” Authoritarian populists today deploy ethnic moral superiority and delusions of persecution as they incite violence against imagined dangers to their group. When we worry about ethnic exclusionists today, we should identify the self-proclaimed moral battleground on which they fight—and take aim at the cruelty behind their high-minded rhetoric. As theologian Reinhold Niebuhr put it in 1963, “There is no deeper pathos in the spiritual life of man than the cruelty of righteous people.”

**Hybrid format; Zoom link here: <https://bit.ly/42cNAZZ>
Open to WSU faculty, students, and general public**

Graduate and faculty seminar

SOCIAL SCIENCE ENCOUNTERS VALUES AND BELIEFS: THE THIRD REICH AS UNIQUE PHENOMENON OR HARBINGER OF TODAY?

Friday, April 7, 11:00 AM–12:30 PM

Tierney House, Wayne State University

5510 Woodward Avenue, Detroit (parking available)

Moral common sense defines virtue as treating others as you would like them to treat you. But as Freud in 1930 feared, the Golden Rule can become, “treat others as you believe they will treat you.” What happens when delusion becomes a belief? Sociologists of post-Cold War backlash observe how shared moral concerns intensify “in-group love” and “out-group” animosity—often eclipsing rational choice. Adolf Hitler, who hung Henry Ford’s portrait behind his desk in the earliest days of the Nazi Party, perfected what we call “value politics” (as distinct from issue politics) that fuel authoritarian populism across Europe and the USA according to Norris and Inglehart’s massive study, *Cultural Backlash*. Seminar participants will discuss charismatic figures who instill fear of a cultural or economic menace (Stuart Hall’s “moral panic”) against which they promise protection. They will differ about parallels between Detroit and Munich in the 1920s, but they may concur with the finding that when a community is on high alert, a common hatred can intensify righteousness and reduce anomie. Koonz suggests that Weimar politics during the Great Depression is a (nightmarish?) model for a democracy that becomes a battle ground in an existential war—when gridlock is inevitable because compromise is cowardly. Can academics contribute to strategic thinking about how to preserve democracy? Should, for example, AP American history courses include Father Coughlin, Ford, the German-American Bund, and the pro-Hitler cabal of US Congressmen (as revealed in the podcast “Ultra” by Rachel Maddow)? By instilling empathy for working families at the lowest rung of the wealth gap, can defenders of small “d” democracy confront populists’ value-laden rhetoric?

Open to WSU graduate students and faculty

RSVP for seminar readings to J'nice Stork, storkj@karmanos.org

Claudia Koonz is the author of two magisterial cultural and gender studies of Nazi Germany: *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family, and Nazi Politics* (St. Martin’s, 1988) and *The Nazi Conscience* (Harvard UP, 2005), as well the co-author of *Becoming Visible: Women in European History* (Houghton Mifflin, 1976). She has written recently on contemporary European’s reactions to women who wear the hijab and the production of ethnic panic in countries where immigrants are culturally marginalized; and the formation of ethnic fears that endow the “us” with the conviction they are summoned to rid the world of an evil “them.” She is the recipient of fellowships from the American Academy in Berlin; the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation; the American Council of Learned Societies; and the

National Humanities Center. Recently she has written in public media on the presidency, authoritarian populism, and global immigration.

Dr. Guy Stern is Distinguished Professor Emeritus in the Department of Classical and Modern Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at Wayne State University, former Provost, and founder of the Academy of Scholars. Born in Germany in 1922, Stern escaped to the United States in 1937 and served in the US Army Military Intelligence Service from 1943 to 1945 as one of the “Ritchie Boys” at Camp Ritchie, Maryland. He landed in Normandy three days after the D-Day invasion and was active until the Allied victory in Europe. He was decorated with the Bronze Star for his work interrogating German prisoners-of-war, and has since been distinguished with the Grand Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany and the National Order of the Legion of Honour; and was interviewed in Ken Burns’s recent documentary *The U.S. and the Holocaust*. His new memoir *Invisible Ink* became available in August 2020; he recently celebrated his 101st birthday.

Sponsored by the Academy of Scholars; the Emeritus Academy; the Humanities Center; the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences; the Department of Classical and Modern Languages, Literatures, and Cultures; and the Helen R. DeRoy Chair.

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