

Ruth Ben-Ghiat

Historian; expert on authoritarianism, propaganda, abuse of power

Media Masters – July 8th 2021

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Welcome to media masters, a series of one-to-one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today I'm joined down the line from New York by Ruth Ben-Ghiat. History professor and political commentator, who's written extensively on threats to democracy around the world. Professor of history and Italian studies at New York university, Ruth is the author of the bestselling book, Strongmen: From Mussolini to the Present, which examines how authoritarian leaders use corruption, propaganda, and machismo to stay in power. Her work allowed her to predict that president Trump would use extreme tactics to try and stay in power after losing the 2020 election. A regular commentator on CNN, Ruth is a historical consultant for film and TV productions, and her work has been supported by Fulbright, Guggenheim and other fellowships. Ruth, thank you for joining me.

Thanks for having me on.

What an incredibly interesting job you have...

Well, I like to say that when my expertise is in demand, it means things are not good in the world, but yes, I feel fortunate to be able to combine teaching and writing for the public and speaking. And it's all good.

Well, every superhero film that I've ever seen has an origin story, and there's so many things to go at, but let's start if we may at how did you end up doing this? Did you always want to be an academic? How did he choose this incredibly interesting discipline?

Well, I grew up in Southern California in a beautiful seaside town and my parents were immigrants, they actually came here from England, from London and I thought I wanted to be a lawyer, and then I worked for a law firm in college and didn't like it. So history was my fallback, but I got interested in the grim side of things like dictatorships because the town I grew up in Pacific Palisades, which is near Malibu, it's near Santa Monica. It's very nice. It was a place where a lot of exiles from Nazism resettled and of course, I didn't know them, they had passed on, but their kids and the grandkids were around. And I just got very interested thinking about what it must

be like to have to leave your country and resettle, like going from Berlin to Los Angeles, such a big life shift. So that's how I got interested in dictatorships, which is quite improbable given where I'm from.

Well, over half the world's population now lives under some form of a liberal rule as you very clearly set out. But you, you actually remain optimistic that human nature will win out?

I work on a lot of grim things and when I wrote my book 'Strongmen,' I wanted to include many of them like descriptions of torture and things, because there's such a move today to deny that history, to hide that history and people need to know what happened. But I think what saves me is I do remain an optimist, I am an optimist in my nature and my character. And I think most people are good and so what my work does is to look at the conditions under which people can be convinced to follow destructive leaders or convinced that violence is the answer or is even necessary, but I don't have a fundamentally pessimistic view of life, cause that would be, that would be rough.

In 'Strongmen' you reveal how perilously close America came to actual fascism under Trump.

I was already writing for CNN on historical topics, so I had a foothold there. And then when I saw Trump come on the scene in 2015 with the rallies and the loyalty oaths, I just got this sense of dread. So I started writing about him and before he was inaugurated, it was just, it was extremely clear to me in a rather terrifying manner, what would probably happen. And of course it never happens exactly the same way, but I was able to predict, and I'm grateful to CNN for publishing those quite bold op-eds that said he would follow with an authoritarian playbook. And some of them were very scary to write because you love your country, you don't want it to end up in the state it did. And we did come way closer than people know and it's one of these things where the more you know about how these things work, the more you're able to see where things could go, but here's the optimist part, it's incredibly, it's rare that we voted out an autocrat in the process of what's called autocratic capture. And of course the GOP are now trying to finish his work at the state level, and we're not done, we're not out of the woods, but we voted him out under great challenges and challenging circumstances like a pandemic. So that's where the optimism comes back in.

Your book details what happens to societies when authoritarian governments take hold, but it also explores the appeal of strongmen to collaborators and followers. I'm interested in how you foresaw Trump getting elected. When Trump was selected as the candidate, I danced a jig. I thought that's great news, it was fairly certain that Hillary would be president. And the fact that they'd chosen an idiot, someone who clearly was not fit to be president meant that the small chance of her losing was down to zero and the 'grabbing by the pussy' thing, the whole Billy Bush thing. Again, I thought, well, what little jumps he had left now, no sensible person could vote for someone who openly boasts about sexually assaulting people and then come election night, you

know what happens? I mean, that was the thing that shocked me is clearly there are people that look at the world through an entirely different lens to me. I can't even see how they see the world and that's how he won. And could you share with our listeners some of the insights that you gained in writing the book so if we're going to stop this happening again, we need to stop people like that getting elected, getting a foothold in power.

That's right, so one of the very bad, of the many, very bad signs were there were evident at the very beginning and not just the content of what Trump was doing, like my first piece is for CNN, and this was like November 2015, really early. When he started re-tweeting Neo Nazi propaganda and that was a clue. So that's the content of what he was doing, but his style was very disturbing and the big red flag came in January 2016, where he did something that it'd be insane for a Democrat, with a small D to do where he announced 'I could shoot someone on fifth avenue and I wouldn't lose any followers.' And so most people thought, what is he insane? You don't talk about shooting someone as a political candidate. And I thought, well, yeah, you do if you're a Duterte or Mussolini who was a criminal, you know, a lot of these strongmen came to office as criminals. They already had records, their violent extremist people, Mussolini had stabbed people and he was a serial rapist. And so Trump was telling us that he was going to be in that mode. And what's really sad is that just a few weeks after that, you think, okay, he's finished, but he was challenging. This is what they do, they throw down the gauntlet and they challenge the system and they provoke people. And what the GOP did is meet him halfway more than halfway. So just a few weeks after that, Jeff Sessions, who was later rewarded by being Attorney General, was the first mainstream GOP person to bring him into the fold. And he showed up at a Trump rally. So that was one, the other was the entertainment industry, which Trump had always been very active in as, as a newsmaking protagonist. And Jimmy Fallon had him on a show. And I didn't know about that while I wrote the book. So when I sat down to write the book it seemed extremely important to put Trump in the perspective of this century of authoritarian tactics, because he was kind of checking all the boxes and people were responding to him in the time-tested way, where violence becomes a brand that sells, and outrage sells and testing the system sells. And so it was with enormous dismay and fear that I saw this happening, like everything falling into place during the campaign. So by the time he came to power, a lot of this work had already been done.

And is it because his opponents just couldn't conceive of someone being like this? You know, you assume that opposing candidates will conduct themselves with dignity and honor. And you know, I look at someone like the late Senator McCain. And even though I wanted President Obama to win, I thought there's someone who is a man of honor who clearly wants the best for the country and has served his country. He's a good family man, hard working. I wouldn't have been upset if it had been President in terms of, as a person, it just caught us all off guard.

Here's the thing. It was a challenge and it still is but much less now, especially after January 6th, to get people, to get Americans, who've only known democracy. Although I date democracy to a civil rights act in the 1960s in the sense, it's not much

of a democracy if half the people can't vote, but there is this identity of America as a democracy. And so coming in and trying to get people to see what was happening with Trump and the GOP and the far right media like Fox in a different frame. Like for me, it is always legible within this authoritarian frame. That's what I was saying before everything Trump did made perfect sense. Nothing was surprising, as dismaying as it was, but it was very difficult for people to accept that and including the media and they couldn't go there, they didn't want to go there. And many of the public don't want to go there because if you accept that, it's very frightening. And then you might have to do something about it. You might have to get involved in a way that you don't want to. Plus these are very threatening people. If you start writing about these things, you do get threats. Things happen and not everybody's suited for that. So it's this kind of asymmetry. When we still see this with some senior Democrats, they're working within the frame of democracy and the GOP and Trump had left bipartisanship. So it's like a mental leap that, and again, January 6th helped the media and the public. And Jay Rosen has talked about this too, to accept that we can't use the lens of democracy anymore, but it's been, it's taken years to get there. And it took this kind of January 6th coup attempt to get people there.

What do you think of Trump as a human being, and that's not as sort of trite or shallow question as it might sound, because I've agonised with this over the years, like clearly, there's some horrendous behaviour, evil, but where does it come from? Does it come from a place of vulnerability and lack of confidence and upset? They say that 'hurt people, hurt people' that someone must've been particularly cruel, or is it just that this guy is what the Americans would call a 'major league asshole' horrible person. I'm interested in the psychology of why he's like that. Is it just the fact that he came from, you know, an authoritarian, rich white family that's had every single opportunity available to him in your society, but has convinced himself that it's his greatness that's got that rather than he always was almost certainly going to succeed anywhere because he had a multi-billionaire father.

It's a combination of things. He was raised, his father taught him he had a brutal father and he, like most authoritarians, he's highly insecure. he's highly brittle, they're all like that, they need constant acclaim and power because they are empty inside. One of Mussolini's biographers, one of his only female biographers, said he was an empty shell without his audience. And that includes, the audience Isn't just people who are at your rallies, it's people you can control like your patronage networks, your politicians. So his father rewarded brutality, his father also taught him that you could be lawless and get away with it. And so Trump's whole business model, which was inherited from his father, is about finding loopholes in the system and tax codes, regulatory things, and being able to get away with it and living in this gray zone between the legal and the illegal. And he simply imported that into politics. And of course, before him, Berlusconi in Italy who did exactly the same thing. They're very, very similar. Trump has more serious consequences because he has nuclear weapons and it's America. But that's part of it, but one of the surprises in writing the book, in not a nice way, was that Trump's personality lines up really well with the history of dictators and each one of course has their quirks. Hitler's a little bit different in some ways than some of them. They're kind of, I don't use this word in the book, but they're kind of hoarders. They have a manic desire to control everyone and

everything. And at its finest stage of development, it becomes a kleptocracy and that's what Mobutu had in the Congo. It's what Putin has right now, what Qaddafi had. And so the resources of society get sucked up for the whole of the public sphere and public goods get converted into vehicles for private enrichment and the same with bodies. A lot of these guys I write about were not only serial sexual assaulters like Trump, but actually had turned the state into a kind of prostitution and recruiting and scouting network. Cause Jeffrey Epstein was the head of state and you use the secret police and you use your personal secretary to find women in Qaddafi's case and also find men. So they're, they're hoarders of bodies of riches. And yet they're very insecure. And it's why, for example, Erdoğan in Turkey, he uses insult suits. He has waged lawsuits against thousands of Turks for supposedly insulting him. So that's the sign that somebody who's secure doesn't do that. And both Trump and Erdogan have, I don't know, three to 5,000 lawsuits under their belt. So they're litigious there and they don't give up. They're very tenacious. They have to get their way at all costs. And this is why they are very destructive. If they feel their power is threatened. And the reason I was able to predict that Trump would not go quietly. I had to turn in the book in the summer of 2020. So I didn't know what would happen, but the election, I wrote that he would not be going quietly. And the history of these figures, they can't give up power. It's like a psychological death. So they are extremely destructive and they would rather them start wars, start civil wars. So I knew early on this is what we were facing.

A friend of mine said at the time, 'cause that for me was horrendous obviously at that moment, just like the Billy Bush tape was the fact that even though he lost the election, he did put on millions of votes and you know, nearly half of America still wanted him to remain president. Do you think that he believes genuinely that he won because I was talking with my friend the other day and he said, he either believes that which is horrendous or he's deliberately cynically trying to ruin the democratic well of the country to say that he's won. But he said, I don't know which one is worse, whether he believes it or not, both scenarios are equally nightmarish...

He knows very, very well that he lost and what these men fear is losing, not just the things I mentioned before the ego addiction, but they fear losing immunity from prosecution and they fear having to finally be accountable if they lose their job. So Trump knows extremely well as do all the GOP politicians that he lost the election. And that's why he invested huge amounts of time and effort as did his allies in the media, et cetera, in this big lie business. And the thing about strongmen is that they're risk takers. They do audacious things that nobody thinks they're ever going to get away with, they invade countries, they steal, they hijack planes to get journalists. They do these things and they push the envelope of what's imaginable, always in a bad way. So what a gamble to decide that you were going to just summarily declare the election as invalid, that had never been done before. That's the thing about American democracy. It had big problems and huge racial inequalities, but it had peaceful transfers of power. Trump's like, no, I have to stay in office because otherwise I'll be prosecuted. And so the bad faith is all of the elites. A lot of his believers, his grassroots followers, they do believe they've been led to believe that he is the true winner. And so here we get to a very important point of the strongmen

psychology and the whole appeal. They have a victim identity. And if you want to know, if you're sitting at home and thinking, okay, how am I going to recognize the next strong men? They start acting as the victim. So Matteo Salvini, who thankfully has been neutralized, but he did this in Italy where he'd come out and say, if they attack me it's like they're attacking the whole nation. I thought, okay, check the box. So the victim is very important because even if they are driven out of office and this was true with Berlusconi too, it becomes a confirmation that the world is really against them. The deep state, you know, whatever the constellation of enemies is. And so the victim complex is crucial to people believing the lies. And Trump, he really pulled this off. It's amazing. He didn't get to stay in power on January 16 at work as a military or armed operation, but he has half the country believing that he won the election. That's, that's incredible, but it's consistent with the incredible things in a bad way that strongmen do.

Not that I would take pleasure in him feeling upset at the moment cause he lost because obviously we've got bigger fish to fry, there's the health of our, of the American democracy at stake here in the future of the country. But in terms of his mentality at the moment, given that he has this strongman way about him and that winning is everything. The fact that he lost most really eat away at him when his head hits the pillow at night, cause he, I was about to say, can't lie to himself, but I suppose he can?

Yeah, the delusion part, so I don't believe he thinks he won. He knows very well that he lost. He could have a delusion that he's going to be back. So that's why you heard news reports when he started saying, 'I'm going to be reinstated in August.' So on the one hand, that's a cynical ploy because you've got to keep your followers. You've got to string them along. And by the way, the followers, he fleeces them for money. That's the whole autocratic thing. You just, that's where we go back to they're a machine for fleecing people, right? For sucking the life and the profits and the money out of people. So he has to keep stringing them along in that way. But some of his advisors were going on record to the New York Times that he actually believes. And they're in a way, one of the failings of strongmen leaders is that they start to believe their own propaganda. They believe they're immune. They believe they're immortal, that they can do anything. And that's where they make mistakes. Like they get into wars they can't win and they steal too much and they're their own worst enemies. So, Trump may indeed believe that somehow he's going to get back and they create these governance structures when they're in power, called inner sanctums. And who's in these inner sanctums? Flatters, sick fence and family, right. And family often, somehow are not the people who can speak frankly to them. Nobody can get through. And if you are a critic or your objective, you're not in the inner sanctum. And that's why their governments are extremely turbulent. Like there's this myth that they're efficient, they get things done, it's actually a 'you know what' show, a shit show, right? And it's extremely unstable. And even leaders who have a military uniform on like Pinochet in Chile, he reshuffled his government like 49 times in 17 years. Because they've got anger issues. They've got control issues. But the key is that you can't tell them anything they don't want to hear. So they fall prey to their own delusions. And so it's possible that Trump who's not in power, but he still controls the GOP. He's found new lackeys and sycophants to be around him. And he could think

that he's going to get back into power because the alternative's too awful. And he doesn't do awful very well.

You can't argue with reality though, when you look at how America bungled the reaction to the pandemic under Trump's leadership, if you only look at what's happening in Brazil, you know where the president said 'this is a fake virus and we'll be fine' and was discouraging people from social distancing and all that. And now of course they're overwhelmed with half a million deaths, it's horrendous. I mean, is it just that they close their eyes and put their fingers in their ears so that they're totally immune to any reason or evidence that they could have got things wrong.

It's partly that. And also they are super performers and you have to believe the lie a little tiny bit to be effective cause he can't afford, he's done this incredible thing of convincing like what is it? 40% of Republicans, which is millions of people that he won the election. He can't now say, oh, guess what? I didn't actually win, I've realized I didn't win. The whole house of cards would come crashing down. So there are very pragmatic reasons, and also this is how corruption works: more and more people are complicit. So think of all the, there must be hundreds of GOP officials from congressmen and senators down to local people who have gone to the media espousing this lie. So their reputations are on the line too. And so this is how these cultures of corruption get entrenched. Everybody has a piece of the lying action now. And it was the same again with different circumstances under fascism, where everybody decided to believe, you know this about the Jews or you know this about other peoples and other regimes. And this is where we are right now. So Trump has to, he has to keep this facade up, even if he knows better.

To what extent is the media, the traditional media and social media, if not necessarily complicit, then at least a piece in the jigsaw in terms of amplifying these messages. Because you know, we all know that the outrage economy drives clicks. You know, when Marjorie Taylor Greene says something that's outrageous, yes, she's a Congresswoman. She's meant to be outrageous, but it sort of leads the news and gives her the oxygen of publicity that she wants. And the more she amps up the rhetoric and the more offensive things she says, the media cover that, you know, Congresswoman says something outrageous. And it's sort of like a negative feedback loop where the media were doing these people's jobs for them. I mean, surely the best way to neutralize the bigoted and toxic rhetoric of my Marjorie Taylor Greene is to just not cover what she says. And yet, you know, there's an issue of that, the practicalities of doing that. And of course the ethics, because the free and fair media should have a duty to report something outrageous that an elected representative has said in Congress, and yet it's doing their bidding for them.

That's right. I mean, the media is in a very tough and dangerous place. And that's continuing because one of the innovations that Trump brought was to traditional enemies of let's say white people like people of color. So they already hated people of color. They may have already hated immigrants. They may have hated Muslims since 9/11, but the media was added as a new hate object. And I wrote an op-ed in CNN on this, about how journalists became hate objects. And that had already been

going on in the right-wing media. And that's how the slogan that I think we shouldn't use 'mainstream media' got started as a denigratory thing. But so they're in a tough place because on the one hand, they're being targeted with violence and threats. And on the other hand, many liberals and the left were angry at them because they were not learning fast enough or not wanting to ignore, or they were trying to still have access journalism models. And I found, you know, some of the reporting by White House correspondents that are often accused of access journalism. I found it very useful because it was really important to reconstruct the character of Trump and the dynamics of the inner circle. And then all of that went into my book. I found it very valuable. And it's also true that for example, QAnon, which is Marjorie Taylor Greene, is an adherent of QAnon. So when it's just a fringe conspiracy theory, maybe you can ignore it. But now it's very alarming. The news is coming out that they are seeding themselves in the landscape. They are running by the dozens for school boards, for city councils, for Congress, I think dozens are running for Congress. So we can't really ignore that because it's part of the political landscape now.

How do you tackle an opponent who either doesn't care about the facts or just laughingly from our point of view just is willing to circumvent them because it's almost like they're fighting, you know, for the same thing, but we're just by completely different rules. It troubles me that, you know, so many millions, more Americans voted for Trump, even though he didn't win because we managed to mobilize more people to vote for president Biden. But for that he could have been elected overwhelmingly. I mean, can you imagine if after everything we've done in this first term, that it would have got reelected with an increased mandate? I mean, but for a few million Democrat voters, that's literally what would have happened.

Yeah, it's very difficult because what's happened now is you can't get to people if you don't go to where they are. So you would have to go on Fox News and you would have to give interviews to Breitbart and all the equivalence, in order to have any hearing, but that's risky. And you set yourself up for just becoming certainly with Tucker Carlson, you become a clown to be ridiculed. There are things you can do. I'm a big fan of what's called exposing the device. When someone tells you a lie, instead of just trying to refute it, getting into a, 'he said, she said,' you have to expose the larger principle. So for the big lie, you have to immediately, calmly draw attention to why they're telling this lie. So it's the why not the what, and this only works if you're on TV or on radio with an opponent, and there are fewer and fewer occasions for that in the states because the siloing of the media is getting extreme. So fewer Democrats are going on Fox News. Although a lot of the cable networks still have these election deniers on. So it's a problem. And it's of course a problem all over the world now. And people falling prey to disinformation, look at Brexit. You know, my mother voted for Brexit and now she regrets it.

Well, I'm very good friends with Robert Wolf who calls himself 'the Dem on Fox.' He's always on there. And I find it fascinating because he wants the democratic case to be put across. And his argument is there are lots of people, millions of people watching Tucker and Sean and all of these people and there needs to be an alternative view. And yet he gets attacked a lot by saying that just by appearing on Fox, that he's betraying the cause, that he's indulging

them, giving them what they want. And I have some sympathy with his argument, which is, if he boycotts Fox News, they're not going to close down the channels, someone has to go there and make the case.

Yes, they do. And the other person who, I don't know if he's going on now, cause he's part of the cabinet, but Pete Buttigieg, who is an extremely effective communicator, wearing his suits and looking the part of a respectable person. This is all, you know, air quotes that he was able to communicate on Fox very effectively. Yeah, I think it needs to be done. It's not for the thin skinned, but if we don't do it, then the disinformation loop is complete. The other avenue is, and the pandemics made this more difficult is, civil society, churches, communities. And there are initiatives, there's a number of initiatives in America trying to put red and blue voters together. Again, the pandemic interrupted this cause this has to be done in person. It can be done on zoom too, but it's community is about physical proximity and relationships that are built, best built in person in places that are neutral, like libraries and churches. And, and so that needs to happen. And also in families but this is a story. I have a newsletter called Lucid about threats to democracy. And I recently interviewed Marianna Spring, of the BBC.

She's the BBC's disinformation reporter. She's coming on this podcast actually in a few weeks. She's fantastic. Isn't she?

Yes, she is. And, she hears a lot from people who are desperate, who can't talk to their families anymore. Cause that's another avenue of trying to reach people who are sucked into disinformation pods and that's difficult. And people are quite distraught. So as a society, both in American and the UK, et cetera, it's a huge problem. And the instruments we have seem crude, with respect to the magnitude of the problem.

Why did he write the book then? Did you have a reader in mind? Is it someone who needs to play their part in making sure that this doesn't happen again? Or is it for the more general reader? I mean, did you have a kind of raison d'être for the book in your mind when you set out to do it?

I guess there were two things. One is that I wanted to, it's really a work of civic education. I'm an academic and my previous books were academic books. Although I'd been doing a lot of journalism, and that was the tone that I took the register was for the general reader to educate them of two things. I suppose. One is that there is this kind of authoritarian playbook that has worked for a century. And so what I did, it made the writing a lot more difficult. I organized the book around the tools of rule. So propaganda has a chapter and each one goes over a hundred years, propaganda corruption, virility, violence. So the reader can see what stayed the same, like personality codes. And that's so interesting. The rules and canons of personality codes haven't changed at all over a hundred years. Like a leader has to be the every man and the man of the people, but he has to be Superman. So, and then you see what's changed like obviously social media and some other things. So that was one thing to kind of get people, to be able to recognize what's going on and give them a frame for it. And the other was putting Trump in the book, which when we were shopping the book, some publishers didn't even want Trump in there, but my agent

and I stuck to our guns. Cause that was extremely important to put America and the GOP and Trump in this lens and break down this idea that it can't happen here and show that he was doing exactly what these other people had always done. And so though that was, it's kind of myth-busting, and when a society has in the wake of somebody like Trump or other rulers, society has to do the tough job of looking itself in the mirror and saying, 'why did we fall for this?' And often they're truths that people don't want to hear because Trump it's not just that, why did Jimmy Fallon have him on after he said he could shoot somebody it's because we have an attachment to male glamour and the glamour of the outlaw, the outrage, this is the land of reality TV. And so there are things that are above politics, but equally noxious that Trump taps in and represents, he was a TV star. And unless we deal with this kind of model of power, of noxious male power, and glamour, we are going to be prone to falling for these people again.

Do you think we will, like hand on heart, what's your gut feeling? Do you think that this is a mistake that we're going to make, like an alcoholic repeatedly falling off the wagon, or is this something where the American people made a mistake, there's lots of lessons to be learned, but they will be learned and it won't happen again and we'll be on guard, but on balance, you don't think it'll happen again, as long as they were guarded, what do you think?

Well, something very scary is happening in the states now where the GOP, so Trump's out, who knows if he's going to run again, probably, but who knows. The GOP with the aid of all the courts, et cetera, is setting up a system of electoral autocracy, where they don't really need Trump. They're doing it because the US is unusual because of the importance of the states and state legislation. So many things happen at the state level. And so they're setting up a slew of voter suppression laws so that they could just invalidate elections. And this goes back to Jim Crow. There's a lot of precedent for this, but they're setting it up so that they may not need the strongmen. And the other thing is that that will change. And I talk about this in the conclusion to the book, these guys are aging, they're all a certain age, around the world and in the future. A lot of times people ask me because the name of the book is strongmen, well, what about women? And we will have a female led authoritarian state of some type, it's every policy's going to look different and it could be Le Pen in France. Who's polling very well with respect to Macron, et cetera. And the women are very strong in the new right, actually. So that could happen. And if that does happen, you're not going to have them stripping their shirts off and showing their pecks like Mussolini and Putin do, but they will be equally racist, be equally exclusive rather than inclusive. All the other things, deeply corrupt. So the playbook will continue, but even with a woman in charge.

I was reading your book about the common themes through the history between sort of dictators and alliance, for example, with big business, I mean, I'm not, I'm not anti-business, but inevitably economist would say people, move from oligopoly to monopoly, and then they start to get into government, they can employ lobbyists and so on, but there does seem to be a thread between a lot of these authoritarian leaders, some kind of aligns with, with big business. How, how can we tackle that?

Yeah, I'm glad you mentioned that because business and financial elites have been extremely important to getting these criminal outlaws, making them acceptable to larger conservative society from the beginning, with Mussolini who had been a socialist and had provoked this Quasi civil war with the left and killing people. And then he became prime minister in 1922 of a coalition government. He wasn't a dictator. And the first thing he did was privatize. He privatized enormous sectors of the economy like insurance and the telephone industry, so that he could win over these business elites. And I mentioned that because the case of Mussolini is less known than the case of Hitler, right, where conservatives and business were able to get him appointed chancellor. And it's been like that all the way through. And so I think today there's a lot of interesting things going on to try and bring business into pro-democracy movements or anti-authoritarian movements. There's economic boycotts that have been used in the states and also England. And there's a lot of interesting digital tools like, against the coup in Myanmar, young digital activists have an app where with real time lists of which companies are collaborating with the junta and they haven't succeeded in downing the dictator, military coup, but they have made a dent. So economic boycotts, citizens have consumer power that they don't always use adequately. And there's also a sector of business that doesn't really want to see the end of democracy. And we need to be much more active in re educating these people, or bring them into the fold. And that's something that has to be prioritized in the next few years.

I'm absolutely fascinated by the insights that you bring in here. And of course, I agree with all of them. My question is what are the practicalities of trying to win people over to this, cause in a sense it is a worldview. It is a set of policies that these people are bad and what they're trying to do to democracy is bad. How do you package it as something where you're trying to win people over? Because one of the things that troubles me is of course, as per your expert analysis, some of these people are actually indulging these guys. They don't want to be won over, they're closed minded. You can't even argue with them about the facts because it is that whole disconnection from fact itself. That is the problem. Is it that you're trying to win over maybe 5 or 10% of them that can be reasoned with, or do you not see yourself as someone trying to sell a proposition, which is frankly it's democracy, isn't it, you're trying to get us away from authoritarian bullies.

Yeah. So there is a core, there's always a core of a hardcore group who are so devoted to the leader, even after he leaves office like Trump and they can't be reached. And people who researched this concur, they can't be reached. And in fact, when we think of historically, even after in Germany, many Germans resisted denazification and they thought the Holocaust was a big lie. It was just propaganda. Now there, you had a real dictatorship with one party state and media, but you see, even in other places where democracy wasn't ruined how there is this core and you can't get to them. So one of the things I'm trying to do in the book and in essays I write is to bust the myths about authoritarian leaders, and the system that leads people to just reflexively support them. And, and for example, the business community, there's this old idea that authoritarians are efficient, right? Mussolini made the trains run on time and everyone's building airports and all of these things

that they do and authoritarians invest a huge amount of money in their personality to seem competent and Putin is the performer. All this business is BS, but the reality, and I'm going to be writing a lot more about what they do to business, is it should be compelling to business people because this is what I do in the book too. It's a highly destructive system and big capital does well. Also if you're in the energy business and oil, or you're an arms trafficker or the big, big, big mining and logging today, cause they're all anti climate change, you'll do well, but there's huge swaths of the economy and business people who are destroyed by authoritarians. Putin has put 70,000 business people under criminal charges and they prey upon and they expropriate their businesses Erdoğan has seized over \$32 billion worth of assets, economic assets, including businesses. So these are things that happened that people don't know about. And this is how these myths continue the same with Trump. We need to have many more stories of the winners and losers economically speaking of the Trump era. And so it's more a question of influencing, not just elites, but middle-class, who maybe can be swayed. There's not so much you can do with that hard core of grassroots supporters at the moment.

So you retain a sense of optimism overall then?

Yes, in a broad historical sense. And I think we have to pay a lot more attention to the fact that yes, authoritarian states rise and endure, but they fall too.

I mean you've written very eloquently that you're continually inspired by the courage and resolve of those that fight corruption and repression.

Yeah, And i'm glad you mentioned that. So there's a chapter on resistance in the book that also goes over a century and it was really important to bear witness and be a vessel of their stories for today. And actually there were a few people who really stood out and inspired and I actually kept their pictures in front of me as I wrote because especially when I wrote the awful parts of the book about torture and sexual violence, I kept their pictures in front of me to inspire me that they helped eventually, they paid a price, some of them, but they helped these regimes to fall in their own way. And I've often said, I think the media doesn't do a good job of covering people who are working right now to inspire us because democracy needs heroes. And the younger generation needs people to look up to. And some of them are there, but there's many more people working sometimes behind the scenes and the media needs to profile them because you may get more clicks from Marjorie Taylor Greene or the villains, but it's important to show because people need hope. If they don't have hope, they're not going to mobilize, they're going to get apathetic or resigned and that's what authoritarians want. So the media can do their part and I'm doing my part. I think everybody who's inclined can do their part to showcase the resilience that people show in the face of political adversity.

I mean, you mentioned earlier about your subscription publication about democracy Lucid. I'd be very interested to talk to you about how that came about and how it's going, but also as you said, you've interviewed some very interesting people and written about them, but I was reading that one of the things that you wrote that really

struck me was you write that sexual harassment is a common factor among the type of abusive relationships that these kind of alpha male, fascist leaders engender.

Yeah, I really wanted to have virility or machismo be a chapter of the book, because I learned a lot from political scientists. I did a lot of research for this book and in political science journals, et cetera, but they don't tend to take masculinity seriously. I'm trained as a cultural historian. And I know how to do that. And in fact my last book was a study of Italian fascist film propaganda and masculinity, all the Mussolini surrogates in those films was a big theme. So I know what to do. I see it. And it's so obvious as with Trump and how the systems populate. They populate the system with little Trump's, little Mussolinis, who are also bullies, who are also sometimes abusers in different ways. So I made sure to put in the book a paragraph about all the domestic abusers and other kinds of harassers who had been hired in the Trump administration. And so the systems it's just like you hire more and more corrupt people. You also hire people who are abusive in various ways. And that way a culture spreads in civil service and outside in society where it's okay, not only just okay to harass or to sexually abuse or other types of it, it's rewarded, that's the key. And the leader sets the tone, which is why I knew we were not in a good place when the Access Hollywood tapes came out and not only it didn't ruin Trump, it actually was a feather in his cap for some, he's a real man. So we've got to recover from that. And I actually think Biden's doing a great job. He's the perfect person in terms of masculinity. He's a family man. He's a believer, he's upright and he's the opposite of Trump in this way. So that's a very interesting part of authoritarianism versus democracy. Although obviously these proclivities are not, they don't line up with politics. I mean, Bill Clinton was frequent in Jeffrey Epstein too, and any type of man on the political spectrum can become drunk with power and be a toxic boss. But it is part of the authoritarian playbook, this culture of toxic masculinity, where you're rewarded for your abusive tendencies.

Tell us about Lucid then and tell us about how it's working on Substack as a writer. It seems that everyone is moving to Substack these days. Are you now a brand in your own right? how does it actually work in terms of if I could call it your media practice? Or do you not see it as that?

No, it's part of the equation, It's just a few months old. I launched it basically April 1st, so it's still finding its way. Substack came to me with the suggestion initially a few years ago. And I, I was writing the book and I was like, I can't do this now. And then it seemed to be the right time. And part of the reason I wanted to do it was a chance to, I am a historian by training. And I've found that in op-eds, there's sometimes not a very big tolerance for history, and I know England is better this way. And so are many places in Europe but in America the proportion of historical things has to be very small. And I was frustrated about that because part of what I do is to show how the past continues in the present. So it was appealing to be able to write in a way I wanted to write. I also have interviews, so I have an essay a week and I have interviews that I interview others. And that's been very, very interesting. And they include people today. I interviewed somebody who's an exile from Turkey under Erdoğan. And it's part of a civic education mandate that I've given myself to let people know the lived reality of authoritarianism, how we get there, what is it like? What are the consequences, including I've written things on exiles. And then I do live

chats, and those are question and answer sessions. And those have been extremely interesting. I do them once a week, at one o'clock. So people come from, from England and Scotland and Europe, and I've had people who feel it's a safe space for them. And I've had people burst into tears and admit that they were Trump supporters, and then they needed to find a home, a congenial compassionate home. And so that's been extremely useful for people to have these spaces, these live chat spaces. So, so far it's been very gratifying, I would say.

So, could you tell our listeners how people can subscribe to Lucid? Is there a web address and so on, how do people follow you on Twitter? Do you have a website? How can people get in touch and follow your work?

Twitter is @RuthBenGhiat, all one word. No hyphen. The lucid address is lucid.substack.com. And it's also in the bio of my Twitter profile and I also have a website www.ruthbenghiat.com where I have all my information about events and my TV interviews and other things it's all there. And there's a signup link there as well for Lucid.

And presumably there's a, there's some inevitable Amazon link on the website to buy your book, which we'll just to remind our listeners is called 'Strongmen: From Mussolini to the Present' Is that correct?

Yes, in the states it's published by Norton, and in the UK it's Profile Books and it's also called 'Strongmen,' it has a different subtitle, but it's called strongmen as well.

Ruth, I knew before this podcast was recorded that I would find this conversation incredibly interesting and enjoyable because I've obviously seen you in lots of media appearances and podcasts before. So I knew I'd enjoy it, it's been an incredible privilege to talk to you myself and ask you my own questions and I've hugely enjoyed it as I predicted I would. Thank you ever so much for your time.

Thank you. I enjoyed it as well.

Do keep up the excellent work.

Thank you.