UCLA School of Law The Promise Institute for Human Rights

Human Rights and the Crisis of World Order

2026 SYMPOSIUM
RECORD OF PROCEEDINGS

Record of Proceedings

On January 23, 2026, The Promise Institute for Human Rights at UCLA hosted its annual symposium on "Human Rights and the Crisis of World Order" at UCLA School of Law.

The symposium aimed to address the structural challenges facing global governance in the context of a shifting world order, particularly the growing vulnerability of international institutions. Within this framework, the panels sought to explore where the human rights project currently stands in relation to the broader struggle for human dignity, and to examine how existing legal frameworks and international institutions are responding—or failing to respond—to these challenges.

We would like to thank Santiago Bustos García for serving as rapporteur for the Symposium and drafting this Record of Proceedings with note-taking assistance from students of the Human Rights in Action Clinic Andrew Beale, José Bisbe Ochoa, Carlos Navarro Parga, and Sergio Gonzalez Varela.

This report has been formatted in a way which is accessible to screen-readers.

Symposium Schedule

- **8:30 AM: Registration, Coffee & Pastries**
- **9:00 AM: Welcome & Opening Remarks**
  - **Cathy Sweetser,** Interim Executive Director, The Promise Institute for Human Rights (Los Angeles)
  - **Michael Waterstone,** Dean, UCLA School of Law
  - **Dr. Eric Esrailian**, Board Member, The Promise Institute for Human Rights at UCLA (with locations at UCLA School of Law and in Europe), Chief, Vatche & Tamar Manoukian Division of Digestive Diseases; Director, Melvin and Bren Simon Digestive Diseases Center; Lincy Foundation Chair in Clinical Gastroenterology; David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA
- **9:20 AM: Symposium Introduction**
  - **Joseph Berra,** Director, Human Rights in the Americas Project, The Promise Institute for Human Rights (Los Angeles)
- **9:30 AM: Panel One: Social Movements and Human Rights**
  - **Roxanna Altholz,** Clinical Professor of Law and Director, Human Rights Clinic, UC Berkeley Law
  - **Alejandra Ancheita**, Human Rights Attorney, Executive Director of the Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Project (Proyecto de Derechos Económicos, Sociales y Culturales-ProDESC), Mexico
  - **Roberta Clarke**, Chair of the Executive Committee of the International Commission of Jurists, Former Commissioner and President, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (2022-2025)
  - **Moderator, Joseph Berra,** Director, Human Rights in the Americas Project, The Promise Institute for Human Rights (Los Angeles)
- **10:45 AM: Break**
- **11:00 AM: Keynote, Dr. Albert Barume**
  - **Dr. Albert Barume,** U.N. Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
  - With **introduction and moderation by Anna Spain Bradley**, MacArthur Foundation Chair in International Justice and Human Rights, Professor of Law and Faculty Director, The Promise Institute for Human Rights at UCLA (with locations at UCLA School of Law and in Europe)

- **12:15 PM: Lunch**
- **1:30 PM: Panel Two: Challenges to Democracy and International Institutions**
    - **Scott Cummings,** Robert Henigson Professor of Legal Ethics, Professor of Law, UCLA Law
    - **Saira Mohamed**, Agnes Roddy Robb Chair in Jurisprudence, Ethics, and Social Responsibility, Professor of Law, UC Berkeley Law
    - **Jaya Ramji-Nogales**, Sheller Family Professor in Public Interest Law, Temple University Beasley School of Law
    - **Lauren van Schilfgaarde**, Assistant Professor of Law, UCLA Law
    - **Moderator Cesare P.R. Romano**, Professor of Law, W. Joseph Ford Fellow, Loyola Law School
- **3:00 PM: Break**
- **3:15 PM: Panel Three: Future World Order(s) and The Meaning of Human Rights**
    - **Cheryl Harris,** Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Professor in Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, UCLA Law
    - **Obiora Okafor**, Edward B. Burling Chair in International Law, Faculty Co-Lead, Governance, Politics, and Society Focus Area, Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies
    - **Sophie Richardson**, Co-Executive Director, Network of Chinese Human Rights Defenders
    - **Moderator Anna Spain Bradley**, MacArthur Foundation Chair in International Justice and Human Rights, Professor of Law and Faculty Director, The Promise Institute for Human Rights at UCLA (with locations at UCLA School of Law and in Europe)
- **4:30 PM: Closing Remarks**
    - **Anna Spain Bradley,** MacArthur Foundation Chair in International Justice and Human Rights, Professor of Law and Faculty Director, The Promise Institute for Human Rights at UCLA (with locations at UCLA School of Law and in Europe)
- **4:45 PM: Poetry Reading**
    - **Moncho Ollin Alvarado,** Poet
    - Introduction by **Kate Mackintosh**, Executive Director, The Promise Institute for Human Rights (Europe)
- **5:00 PM: Closing Reception**

Symposium Introduction (9:20 – 9:30am)

Joseph Berra, Director, Human Rights in the Americas Project, The Promise Institute for Human Rights

The speaker opened the symposium by sitting the discussion within what he described as a widely recognized crisis of world order. Rather than offering a single definition, **Berra** emphasized the multiple and overlapping ways in which this crisis has been understood. In mainstream discourse, it is often framed as a crisis of the liberal democratic order, the very framework within which the contemporary human rights project has developed. Others interpret it as a geopolitical struggle marked by the reconfiguration of global power into competing spheres of influence and the increasingly explicit exercise of political and economic domination. From a political economy perspective, **Berra** referenced scholars such as Wolfgang Streeck and Sven Beckert, who characterize the crisis as internal to global neoliberal capitalism itself, pointing to the unsustainability of its logic of unlimited growth, rising inequality, mounting indebtedness, and intensified competition over limited resources. Within this context, liberal democracy appears increasingly constrained by neoliberal economic forces. Drawing on Antonio Gramsci, **Berra** described the present moment as an interregnum, a transitional period in which the old order is declining while a new one has yet to fully emerge.

Against this backdrop, **Berra** posed a series of questions concerning the place of the human rights project within this broader structural crisis. He asked whether human rights continue to function as a meaningful framework for preventing harm, promoting human dignity, and supporting emancipatory struggles, or whether their conceptual foundations must be fundamentally reexamined. Referencing Mark Goodale, **Berra** highlighted the critique of universality as a foundational myth of human rights. He noted that myths can

serve important social and political functions by providing shared meaning and orientation but questioned whether the myth of universality continues to sustain liberatory political projects or whether it now obscures deeper structural inequalities. He suggested pursuit of the myth of universality emerges through the ongoing struggle of those whose humanity has been denied. Through both social contest and dialog, universality is seen as a point of arrival, rather than an abstract philosophical point of departure. **Berra** also drew on César Rodríguez Garavito's concept of the "more than human," which challenges Enlightenment-based notions of human autonomy by emphasizing relationality and interconnectedness across social, biological, and ecological systems. This framework, he suggested, raises fundamental questions about whether existing human rights paradigms can accommodate alternative ontologies, particularly those rooted in Indigenous and non-Western knowledge systems.

Berra further invoked Catherine Lu's critique of linear narratives of progress within human rights theory, emphasizing her argument that meaningful social transformation has historically emerged from resistance led by oppressed communities rather than from gradual moral evolution within institutions of power. This perspective challenges dominant assumptions about the development of international human rights and underscores the need to rethink its foundations through decolonial frameworks. **Berra** concluded his opening remarks by framing the symposium as an opportunity to critically reflect on these tensions and to examine the role of human rights within an uncertain and transforming global order. He posed the question: to what extent will the human rights movement align with the forces of Davos, defending the international order in defense of global capitalism, and to what extent will it align with the forces of Porto Alegre and the world social forum, with their mantra of "another world is possible?"

With this introduction to the broader discussion, **Berra** proceeded to briefly introduce the first panel, titled Social Movements and Human Rights. In this panel, three distinguished

peakers presented reflections grounded in their fieldwork and scholarly engagement, highlighting diverse approaches to the human rights project and its relationship to contemporary social movements.

Panel One: Social Movements and Human Rights (9:30 – 10:45am)

Guiding Theme: Social movement actors have played a central role in defining and reshaping human rights through their struggles and demands directed at national and international systems. This panel explored the impact of social movements on the human rights project, as well as their current challenges and future priorities.

Panel 1 Speakers:

- **Roxanna Altholz,** Clinical Professor of Law and Director, Human Rights Clinic, UC Berkeley Law
- **Alejandra Ancheita,** Human Rights Attorney, Executive Director of the Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Project (Proyecto de Derechos Económicos, Sociales y Culturales-ProDESC), Mexico
- **Roberta Clarke**, Chair of the Executive Committee of the International Commission of Jurists, Former Commissioner and President, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 2022-2025

The panel began with an opening statement by **Roberta Clarke** followed by inquiring of the two other panelists their opinions regarding the role of social movement actors in reshaping the human rights struggles:

Roberta Clarke: the current crisis of international order is visible through widespread human rights abuses, the breakdown of the rule of law, and stolen or deeply contested elections. **Clarke** referred to situations in which states have recognized political leaders

who were not democratically elected or who were not even residing in the country, noting that these decisions have already divided the international community and weakened shared legal principles. She emphasized that the crisis is often discussed as something abstract or distant, even though its consequences are already being felt most acutely in less powerful countries.

Clarke stated that the international order is weakened not only when powerful states openly disregard international law, but also when states fail to reach principled consensus grounded in international legal norms. According to the panelist, this failure has significantly reduced the policy space available to smaller and developing countries. She noted that outcomes in the international system are often shaped more by military and economic power than by treaties or institutions and highlighted the United States as a particularly troubling example, given its unexpected retreat, even at a rhetorical level, from commitments to the international rule of law.

Clarke pointed to examples in the Americas where international legal tools have been used to support allied political interests rather than principled accountability. She referred to the threat of sanctions in Brazil in a context where investigations into former President Bolsonaro were ongoing, as well as to reported intrusions or interventions affecting electoral processes in countries such as Honduras and Argentina. She described these cases as part of a broader regional pattern of regression and retreat in both national and international rule of law.

In this context, **Clarke** stressed that social movements across the Americas have not been silent. She explained that these movements have actively challenged authoritarianism, corruption, and the capture of state resources for private benefit. She also mentioned their role in monitoring resource extraction, the displacement of Indigenous and rural communities, and the consolidation of power that threatens the independence of judicial institutions. According to **Clarke**, social movements carry out this work through persistent

monitoring, analysis, and engagement with international human rights institutions, including the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

She acknowledged that it is difficult to assess the full impact of social movements in the current moment but emphasized that without them repression would be significantly worse and far less visible to the outside world. She stated that social movements continue to insist on accountability and to fight for democracy and the rule of law, while paying a heavy price for doing so. Their leaders face criminalization, closure of organizations, stigmatization, and violence, patterns that are evident across many countries in the Americas and the Caribbean.

Clarke also noted that the current period is marked by deep polarization and by the presence of both progressive and regressive social movements. She observed that regressive movements have gained strength in several countries through democratic elections, reflecting widespread public fatigue with violence, corruption, unfulfilled development promises, and persistent inequality. These movements often frame their agendas around securitization and so-called traditional values, and they increasingly target international human rights institutions and treaty regimes, a process amplified by social media platforms.

She concluded by emphasizing that the effectiveness of the international human rights framework depends on states paying attention and acting collectively to interrupt patterns of serious violations. She observed that too often the international community remains silent, driven more by transactional interests than by principled commitments. Despite the flaws of democracy, she asked what alternative exists to the international rule of law and argued that defending the human rights framework requires resistance to violence and economic coercion, as well as stronger connectivity and solidarity among states, institutions, and social movements.

Alexandra Ancheita: based on her experience supporting Indigenous communities and collective workers affected by corporate activity through transnational advocacy and strategic litigation, **Ancheita** reflected on how social movements engage with human rights, what they demand from the human rights movement, how they define rights at the grassroots level, and whether they rely on human rights language or develop other vocabularies of justice.

She emphasized that human rights are not neutral tools. From her experience, they can be powerful for naming harm, mobilizing solidarity, and opening institutional doors, but they can also operate as restrictive and technocratic languages shaped by colonial legacies. These dynamics are not abstract but are lived daily in struggles over land, labor, the environment, and so-called development or energy transition. For this reason, she argued that legal frameworks should be treated as political spaces that can be used strategically, questioned, reshaped, and sometimes resisted.

Addressing what social movements say to the human rights movement, **Ancheita** identified several recurring demands. First, she noted that movements often insist on "do not speak for us, walk with us." At the grassroots level, rights are not experienced as services delivered from outside, but as part of collective struggle, organization, and self-determination. She referred to Indigenous communities defending rivers and sacred sites, who are not only asking for recognition of violations, but for recognition of their authority over territory, governance, and knowledge systems. In this context, human rights are understood as conditions for collective existence and continuity, not merely individual entitlements.

Second, she stressed that for social movements, human rights must be about power, not only harm. Movements often experience human rights practice as overly focused on documenting violations while leaving intact the structural conditions that produce dispossession and exclusion. In conflicts around large-scale energy projects, the core

issues are control over land, consent, community decision making, and the social and cultural costs of projects framed as progress or transition.

Third, **Ancheita** explained that many communities find dominant human rights categories too limited. Frameworks centered on individuals, victims, and isolated violations fail to capture long term harms such as environmental destruction, loss of livelihoods, community fragmentation, gendered impacts, and pervasive fear. As a result, grassroots understandings of rights are relational and collective, tied to territory and future generations. For many movements, justice is not only compensation, but transformation, including guarantees of non-repetition, protection of defenders, and the ability to shape the rules that govern their lives.

On whether movements rely on human rights discourse or alternative vocabularies, **Ancheita** said the answer is both. Movements often use human rights language strategically in international arenas because it carries institutional weight, while also articulating broader concepts of justice that go beyond mainstream human rights frameworks. She illustrated this with examples of Indigenous communities using corporate accountability and due diligence mechanisms to challenge energy projects, suspend harmful developments, and assert self-determination, while also engaging international and transnational accountability processes.

She concluded by emphasizing that human rights do not exist in the abstract. Their meaning and force come from people, communities, and collective struggles. The language of human rights remains relevant only as long as it serves as a tool for organizing, building collective power, and sustaining hope.

Roxanna Altholz: situating her work as a human rights attorney who, for more than two decades, has litigated cases involving massacres, forced disappearances, torture, and extrajudicial killings, **Altholz** explained that she is not a lawyer who acts independently of movements, but one who is called in to support them. This work has allowed her to work

closely with social movements and to understand their priorities and agendas from within, rather than treating human rights litigation as a detached professional exercise.

She described her long-term work in Guatemala on forced disappearances ordered by military high command, cases in Colombia related to paramilitary violence, and litigation in the United States concerning the killing by the Border Patrol of Anastasio Hernández Rojas, a Mexican national and long-term U.S. resident. She also referred to her work around the murder of Berta Cáceres and Indigenous movements in Honduras. Through these experiences, she explained, she has worked alongside anti-capitalist, feminist, migrant rights, and victims of state violence movements that seek to internationalize domestic struggles and domesticate international legal norms.

Based on this work, **Altholz** stressed that she does not see the human rights movement and social movements as separate entities. In her view, there is no human rights movement without social movements. To illustrate this, she referred to the 2013 domestic conviction of former Guatemalan head of state Efraín Ríos Montt for genocide. Although the conviction was later overturned, the decision recognized Indigenous peoples as victims of racism and public enemies of the state. Drawing on academic reflections on the case, she emphasized that contrary to the colonial narrative in which law and human rights move from the center to the margins, the Ríos Montt case showed that demands for law and justice can emerge from the periphery, where new political possibilities are incubated.

She noted that while the human rights system is formally state centric, it is not where the communities she works with primarily seek justice. As an example, she discussed the 2015 complaint filed against the United States before the Inter American Commission for the extrajudicial killing of Anastasio Hernández Rojas. Although the Commission took nearly a decade to issue a decision, rendering it ineffective as a remedy, the process itself was used strategically to raise visibility, mobilize support, and generate accountability along

the way, particularly around long-standing patterns of violence and impunity at the U.S. border.

Altholz emphasized that human rights work should not be reduced to individual violations, abstract legal principles, or institutional procedures. In countries such as Colombia, Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras, she described human rights as a form of resistance against inequality, exclusion, and the political economy of violence. She noted that U.S. aid has often fueled this violence rather than protected communities, a reality that must be acknowledged when considering U.S. withdrawal from international institutions and the defunding of humanitarian aid.

She concluded by arguing that human rights should not be understood as a professionalized field of litigation and monitoring. Instead, rights are claims built through struggle, often under threat, and defined through movement practice. In these contexts, human rights mean defending life, land, autonomy, and collective survival. She reflected on the absence of a sustained human rights movement in the United States led by victims of state violence, noting that while moments such as the George Floyd protests briefly opened that possibility, the opportunity remains unfinished. She closed by emphasizing in the United States there is still the opportunity to fight for a more expansive and capacious notion of justice than the one currently reflected in its constitutional framework.

After the three speakers' interventions, **Altholz** asked the other panelists "What do they think about the situation in the US? What advice do you have for us?"

In response, **Roberta Clarke** stated that she did not have advice to offer, but rather solidarity. She noted that those working in human rights are already living this moment through their own experience. What she found most striking is the extent to which the democratic architecture in the United States, long assumed to be stable, is being destabilized. Core principles such as judicial independence, the separation of powers, and

freedom of expression are under pressure, revealing that human rights are fundamentally about power as much as they are about repairing harm.

She emphasized that this moment reflects a consolidation of legal, political, and economic power with deep historical continuities, rooted in the country's history of enslavement and the marginalization of Indigenous peoples. For many African Americans, she noted, the current crisis feels like a continuation of longstanding experiences of violence and exclusion rather than a rupture.

Clarke argued that social movements must continue to build momentum and make visible the ways in which democratic foundations are being undermined, particularly given that critical analysis is not widely shared. She concluded by stressing that what happens in the United States has global implications due to its military and economic power, and that solidarity across movements, both thematically and geographically, is essential.

Alejandra Ancheita followed by affirming in line with **Roberta Clarke's** remarks, that she did not see her comments as advice, but rather as an observation drawn from her work with social movements in Mexico and other countries. From that perspective, she noted a sense of surprise in the United States, particularly among middle class sectors, about the current political and democratic situation. For many outside the country, however, what is happening does not appear sudden. She emphasized that these developments have been unfolding for some time, and that the present moment represents a peak in a longer process of transformation of values in the United States.

She observed that, for the first time, colleagues in the U.S. human rights community are experiencing conditions long familiar to activists elsewhere. She mentioned that friends and partners are now asking practical questions about safety protocols, surveillance, and the risk of being followed or having communications intercepted. Drawing on experiences in Mexico, including scandals involving the use of spyware against human rights defenders, she noted the striking reversal in dynamics. Whereas organizations in the

Global South once looked to the United States for guidance, the flow of concern and learning is now moving in the opposite direction, reshaping power relations within the global human rights movement.

Despite the seriousness of the context, **Altholz** described herself as a realist who still sees opportunity. She suggested that moments of crisis can also open space for reflection and transformation, particularly in how movements understand risk, solidarity, and collective action.

Building on this point, she emphasized that U.S. society has an opportunity to look back to its own histories of resistance, especially the civil rights movement and struggles for voting rights led by Black communities. These experiences, she argued, offer important lessons for how power is built collectively. While corporate power continues to operate globally and deploy sophisticated strategies, she expressed the view that it can be resisted through renewed, collective forms of democratic organization.

She concluded by framing the present as a critical historical moment not only for the United States, but for the world. In her words, societies can either endure this moment passively or organize through it. For her, the possibility of organizing represents an opportunity that remains open to all.

Following the initial interventions, and before opening the panel to questions from the audience, the moderator invited the speakers to offer any additional reflections or comments in response to their colleagues' presentations.

In response to **Althotz's** remark about the inefficiency of Inter-American human rights system in cases such as George Floyd, **Roberta Clarke** pointed out that her intention was not to defend the system uncritically, but to emphasize its continued relevance for social movements and human rights advocacy. She stressed that human rights and social justice movements are deeply interconnected, and that international and regional mechanisms

play a critical role in addressing both individual and collective harm while guiding state accountability. Although acknowledging legitimate critiques regarding delays and inefficiencies, **Clarke** argued that these institutions remain essential components of the international rule of law and must be defended even as they are constructively criticized.

Clarke pointed to the growing use of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights as evidence of its ongoing utility, noting that petitions increased from 1,327 in 2007 to 2,883 in 2024, alongside a significant rise in precautionary measures. She emphasized that the system serves not only as a forum for individual complaints but also as a site for developing broader normative frameworks, including emerging rights related to climate justice and environmental protection. While implementation ultimately depends on states, **Clarke** underscored the importance of the system in providing legitimacy, empowering victims, and enabling social movements to challenge structural inequalities. She concluded by calling for greater engagement with regional and international human rights mechanisms, emphasizing that their continued relevance depends on active use and critical participation by civil society.

Following **Clarke**, **Alejandra Ancheita** responded by reflecting on her experience litigating before the Inter-American system, including nearly 100 cases before the Inter-American Commission and 11 cases before the Inter-American Court. She emphasized that engagement with the system historically represented more than a forum for seeking justice; it was also a space in which advocates and social movements actively participated in shaping the development of international human rights law. **Ancheita** recalled that, particularly in earlier decades, the Commission was composed of highly respected jurists deeply connected to human rights struggles in the region, and that it played a pioneering role in integrating both international human rights law and international humanitarian law into its decisions.

However, **Ancheita** expressed concern that the Commission has been weakened over time, describing it as, in part, "a victim of its own success." She argued that sustained political pressure from states, including the United States, has undermined its credibility and institutional strength. In particular, she noted a shift away from its adjudicatory function, with fewer hearings dedicated to individual cases and greater emphasis on thematic hearings that do not produce binding determinations of state responsibility. She also highlighted concerns regarding significant delays in decision-making and declining quality in legal reasoning in certain cases.

Ancheita concluded by emphasizing that the Inter-American system's ability to issue determinations of state responsibility had historically been a powerful tool for accountability, particularly in countries where domestic law required implementation of its decisions. She warned that efforts by states to resist and undermine these mechanisms have contributed to the weakening of the system, reinforcing concerns about its current capacity to effectively fulfill its adjudicatory role.

Following **Ancheita's** intervention, **Roberta Clarke** agreed with her assessment, emphasizing that these concerns underscored the importance of sustained engagement with the Inter-American Commission. **Clarke** affirmed that meaningful critique of the institution is necessary and should be grounded in careful documentation and analysis. She stressed that civil society and scholars must actively write about the Commission's decisions, assess their quality, and examine the political dynamics surrounding the election of commissioners.

Alejandra Ancheita further reflected on the broader global context in which these institutional challenges are unfolding. She emphasized that the current moment represents not only a period of crisis for the Inter-American system, but also a wider crisis of multilateralism, including growing critiques of the United Nations and its capacity to respond effectively to contemporary human rights violations. In this context, **Ancheita**

suggested that while it remains essential to continue defending and engaging with existing regional and international mechanisms, there is also an important opportunity to look beyond them.

She pointed in particular to developments in other regional systems, such as the African human rights system, which she described as contributing innovative theoretical and legal approaches to human rights. **Ancheita** also highlighted the increasing importance of engaging economic frameworks as part of human rights advocacy, noting a growing recognition within legal practice of the need to address the intersection between economic structures and human rights violations. She concluded by emphasizing that the present moment calls both for continued support of existing human rights institutions and for the expansion of advocacy strategies through engagement with alternative mechanisms and emerging legal frameworks

Joseph Berra intervened to reframe the discussion by grounding the institutional debate in the lived realities of social movements, drawing on the example of the *Triunfo de la Cruz* case in Honduras. He explained that the Garífuna community had initiated litigation before the Inter-American Commission in 2003, which led to a 2015 judgment by the Inter-American Court ordering the Honduran state to recognize and title the community's ancestral lands and remove third-party occupants. However, **Berra** emphasized that a decade later, the state had failed to implement the ruling. In response, the community began to enforce the decision themselves by reoccupying their lands and asserting their legal rights based on the Court's judgment.

After **Berra's** intervention the panel was open for intervention by the attendees, where the following questions were introduced:

To what extent can human rights law enable social transformation, and how might it also constrain political imagination and structural change?

Does the current crisis in the international system create an opportunity for the Global South to play a more central role in shaping the future of human rights?

What structural or strategic barriers prevent social movements from translating moments of mass mobilization into lasting institutional change, particularly in the United States?

In response to the question, **Roxanna Altholz** reflected on the relationship between law and transformation, emphasizing that legal change is often driven by social movements and the lived experiences of affected communities. She cited the development of international norms on forced disappearance as an example, explaining that these legal definitions were shaped through sustained advocacy, particularly by families of the disappeared, and incorporate not only legal violations but also emotional and psychological harm. In this sense, she stressed that the relationship between law and social movements is not unidirectional; rather, movements shape legal norms just as legal frameworks shape movement strategies.

Altholz argued that the most transformative dimension of the Inter-American human rights system lies in its approach to reparations, which expands traditional notions of justice beyond monetary compensation or punishment. She contrasted this with the U.S. legal system, which she described as primarily focused on financial compensation and incarceration, noting that international human rights mechanisms instead seek to address structural causes and broader forms of harm. She illustrated this point through her work on the Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts; a mechanism created under the auspices of the Inter-American Commission to investigate and accompany the collective demands for justice and reparations in the case of the cause of assassinated Honduran indigenous environmental defender Berta Cáceres. The Group's report traced financial responsibility to corporate actors and international banks and produced detailed recommendations aimed at addressing structural accountability.

Finally, **Altholz** identified structural barriers within the United States that limit the ability of social movements to achieve lasting change, criticizing what she described as a broader pattern of institutional compliance and "anticipatory obedience" by legal, academic, and media institutions. She emphasized that such dynamics discourage resistance and reinforce existing power structures. At the same time, she underscored the critical role of collective action, particularly student organizing and labor mobilization, arguing that meaningful structural transformation depends on sustained social movement participation capable of challenging institutional inertia and promoting accountability.

In response to the question on law and transformation, **Alejandra Ancheita** emphasized that the relationship between law and social change is multidimensional and deeply shaped by power and economic structures. Drawing on the work of Katharina Pistor, she reflected on how law has historically functioned as an instrument for codifying and protecting capital, defining systems of property and ownership. However, she stressed that lawyers and social movements can also use this same legal framework to advance transformative goals, particularly when legal advocacy is grounded in social demands and collective struggle.

Ancheita highlighted that transformation through law depends on lawyers' ability to listen to and work alongside social movements, rather than treating law as a self-contained solution. She explained that social movements, particularly Indigenous communities, often understand law as only one tool within a broader political strategy. Reflecting on her work with Indigenous communities in Chiapas, she recalled how community members reminded her that legal advocacy was just one part of a long-term struggle for justice, rather than its ultimate resolution. For **Ancheita**, this experience underscored that the transformative potential of law lies not in legal institutions alone, but in its use as part of sustained, movement-led efforts for structural change.

Finally, **Roberta Clarke** emphasized that while law alone cannot produce transformation, it plays a critical role in shaping resistance and enabling social change. She explained that law, particularly human rights law, functions as a normative and standard-setting framework that can guide demands for justice, even if its transformative potential depends on implementation by a range of actors beyond legal institutions. Using the metaphor of a sieve, **Clarke** argued that law can address some forms of injustice but cannot resolve structural inequalities on its own; rather, it provides a language and direction that social movements can use in their broader struggles.

Clarke illustrated this dynamic with developments in the Caribbean, where courts have relied on international human rights law to strike down the criminalization of same-sex intimacy, despite resistance in legislative and social spheres. While acknowledging that such legal decisions may not immediately transform social attitudes, she emphasized that they reshape expectations, establish legal standards, and empower individuals and communities to assert their rights. **Clarke** concluded that law remains an essential tool for social movements, not as a complete solution, but as a framework that supports resistance, articulates demands, and advances the broader pursuit of equality and justice.

Keynote (11:00-12:15 pm)

Anna Spain Bradley introduced **Dr. Albert Barume**, United Nations Special Rapporteur, highlighting his distinguished career and longstanding commitment to the advancement of Indigenous peoples' rights. She noted that **Dr. Barume** brings over twenty-five years of experience working across local, regional, and international levels, and emphasized his origins in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where he was among the first generation of lawyers engaged in human rights advocacy on the African continent. **Spain Bradley** underscored his leadership in multiple international legal initiatives and his significant contributions to the development of international human rights law, noting his exceptional record and principled commitment to justice. She concluded by describing **Dr. Barume** as a compassionate and visionary leader who embodies the values and ethos of human rights advocacy, and whose work offers a powerful example of what the pursuit of justice can achieve.

Moderator: Anna Spain Bradley, MacArthur Foundation Chair in International Justice and Human Rights, Professor of Law and Faculty Director, The Promise Institute for Human Rights at UCLA

Keynote Speaker: Dr. Albert Barume, U.N. Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

Guiding Theme: human rights and the rule based international order exist to prevent human suffering, and that their erosion disproportionately endangers Indigenous peoples by reviving patterns of domination, dispossession, and exclusion.

Dr. Albert Barume opened his keynote lecture by expressing gratitude for the opportunity to speak at length, noting how rare it is in institutional human rights spaces to have sufficient time to articulate complex ideas. Drawing from his personal history, he explained that he was born and raised in a small village under a long-standing dictatorship, an experience that deeply shaped his understanding of human rights not as abstract legal concepts but as lived necessities. For him, working in human rights has always been inseparable from witnessing repression, fear, and structural injustice firsthand. In that sense, he emphasized that the current global moment should not be seen only as a crisis but also as an opportunity to demonstrate why human rights norms matter for societies as a whole.

He argued that the contemporary challenges facing human rights and internationalism signal a return to first principles, effectively bringing the world back to the drawing board of the mid twentieth century. He recalled the Atlantic Charter of 1941, crafted by Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill, as a foundational document that articulated a vision of a world free from military domination, conquest, and the repetition of mass suffering. That charter, he explained, was not merely a political statement but a moral blueprint that later informed the creation of the United Nations Charter in 1945. At its core was a shared recognition that human suffering and pain are universal regardless of nationality, race, or wealth, and that the primary purpose of human rights norms was to prevent such suffering from recurring across generations.

He stressed that human rights were not originally conceived as political tools but as responses to the horrors of war, genocide, and systemic violence witnessed during the first half of the twentieth century. Their formal recognition by the international community was a direct attempt to ensure that the atrocities of that era would never happen again. When the United Nations Charter declared the determination to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, it reflected a collective acknowledgment of

humanity's vulnerability when legal and moral restraints collapse. In his view, the current erosion of these norms demonstrates just how fragile that post war consensus has become and how easily the world can slide back toward unchecked power and suffering.

Turning to his mandate on Indigenous peoples, he described them as living reminders of the human cost of policies rooted in conquest, domination, and exclusion. Indigenous peoples, he explained, have historically faced a particularly pernicious form of discrimination that is both racial and dehumanizing. Unlike other forms of racism, this discrimination denied Indigenous peoples their very humanity, portraying them as savage or incapable of civilization. This dehumanization served a clear legal and political purpose by justifying land dispossession through the denial of Indigenous peoples' capacity to hold property or exercise rights. Doctrines such as discovery were built on the assumption that Indigenous societies were incapable of owning land, governing themselves, or raising their children, leading to forced assimilation, the removal of children, the suppression of languages, and intergenerational trauma.

He emphasized that these policies did not merely harm individuals but systematically destroyed identities, self-esteem, and collective futures, producing enduring consequences that remain visible today in disproportionate incarceration rates, high levels of suicide, substance abuse, and social marginalization. Indigenous peoples, he noted, often represent a small percentage of national populations while accounting for a vastly disproportionate share of those imprisoned, a reality that cannot be understood without acknowledging this historical violence.

While recognizing that international law has evolved through instruments such as the International Labour Organization Convention 169 and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, he cautioned that progress remains incomplete and uneven. Many states have acknowledged past injustices, but structural implementation gaps persist. He warned that if the rule based international order were to collapse,

Indigenous peoples would face particularly severe consequences due to a convergence of contemporary factors.

He identified five such factors: the global scramble for strategic minerals critical to energy transitions, the rapid expansion of carbon markets and green investments without adequate safeguards, the push to expand protected areas often on Indigenous lands, the growing overlap between Indigenous territories and geopolitical or security hotspots, and the increasing presence of criminal networks, trafficking routes, and extremist groups in remote border regions where Indigenous communities live. These dynamics, he argued, place Indigenous peoples on the front lines of global crises while states often respond by militarizing their lands and treating Indigenous leaders as security threats rather than partners.

He criticized this approach as fundamentally misguided, arguing that Indigenous peoples possess deep territorial knowledge and governance systems that could strengthen national security if states engaged them as partners rather than adversaries. The right to self-determination, he emphasized, is central here not only as a legal principle but as a condition for dignity, autonomy, and survival. Just as the right to life is foundational for individuals, self-determination is foundational for peoples, since without it nations and communities cannot meaningfully exist.

Reflecting on the United Nations Charter, he highlighted four core principles as pillars of relative global stability over the past seven decades: equality, non-discrimination, self-determination, and friendly relations among nations. Equality and non-discrimination, he explained, are two sides of the same coin. They do not demand uniformity but fairness, respect, and the removal of structural barriers that prevent certain groups from enjoying rights on equal footing. Special measures for marginalized groups, including Indigenous peoples, do not create new rights but rather adapt existing ones to ensure genuine equality.

He acknowledged that these principles have increasingly been questioned in recent years, with populist rhetoric, unilateralism, and resource driven policies undermining the international legal order. Some political leaders have gone as far as suggesting that equality and self-determination are no longer relevant or desirable. While he rejected the claim that the international legal order has fully collapsed, he recognized that it is under severe strain and that current global events offer a glimpse of the chaos that would result if these foundational norms were abandoned entirely.

He concluded by framing the present moment as both a warning and an opportunity. The erosion of human rights norms disproportionately affects the most vulnerable, including Indigenous peoples, who are already experiencing increased hate speech, stereotyping, and exclusion. At the same time, he called on states, institutions, and individuals, particularly younger generations, to reaffirm their commitment to human rights, build new alliances, and place human dignity back at the center of public life. Citing a reference attributed to John F. Kennedy, he closed by invoking the need to build a world of law in which the strong are just and the weak are secure, emphasizing that no state or individual would be safe in a world where the rule based international order fully collapses.

After **Barume's** keynote speech, two members of the public asked the following questions:

*What is the source of **Dr. Barume's** cautious optimism in the principles of the current world order?*

In response, **Dr. Barume** explained that his cautious optimism stems from the opportunity that moments of crisis create to educate younger generations and broader society about the importance of human rights. He emphasized that the current global context, while deeply concerning, provides a critical moment for reflection on why human rights norms exist and why they must be defended. He noted a growing pattern in which states accuse one another (often neighboring countries) of politicizing human rights discourse or using

allegations of violations as tools of political pressure. However, he stressed that the deeper question is not simply the existence of these tensions, but what lessons humanity will draw from this shared moment. He framed the issue as a collective moral and political choice, asking what kind of world we want to build and live in together.

Another attendee asked: How can we maintain faith in the international legal order in light of ongoing conflicts such as Armenia and Ukraine?

In response to this question, **Dr. Barume** emphasized that the strength of the international legal order lies in the norms and agreements created by the international community, but that their effectiveness depends on state compliance. He explained that once international legal standards are established, it becomes the responsibility of states to observe and implement them. He cited the prohibition of torture as an example, noting that while international conventions clearly outlaw torture, enforcement depends on states incorporating and respecting those obligations domestically. He underscored that the challenge facing international order is therefore not the absence of legal norms, but the failure of states to consistently uphold and enforce the commitments they have voluntarily undertaken.

The keynote concluded with a special expression of gratitude to **Dr. Albert Barume** for his presence and for sharing his insights with the audience. Following his remarks, the event adjourned for a lunch break at 12:00 p.m., allowing participants to continue informal discussions before the afternoon sessions resumed.

Panel Two: Challenges to Democracy and International Institutions (1:30-3:00pm)

Guiding Theme: The current crisis in world order is straining the foundations of democracy and international institutions in various ways. Our panel will address these challenges, assess the future of these institutions, and the struggles to preserve, transform, or make them relevant. Panelists will present critical perspectives on international law and institutions, focusing on transnational networks attacking the rule of law; the shortcomings of rights frameworks in international law; the ability to realize self-determination rights within a non-state collective, and the state vs non-state distinction in international law; and whether international institutions can function as spaces to defend human rights and the rule of law in the face of erosion of domestic institutions.

Moderator: Cesare P.R. Romano, Professor of Law, W. Joseph Ford Fellow, Loyola Law School

Panel 2 Speakers:

- **Scott Cummings,** Robert Henigson Professor of Legal Ethics, Professor of Law, UCLA Law
- **Saira Mohamed,** Agnes Roddy Robb Chair in Jurisprudence, Ethics, and Social Responsibility, Professor of Law, UC Berkeley Law
- **Jaya Ramji-Nogales**, Sheller Family Professor in Public Interest Law, Temple University Beasley School of Law
- **Lauren van Schilfgaarde,** Assistant Professor of Law, UCLA Law

The panel was introduced by Professor **Cesare P.R. Romano**, followed by presentations from the four speakers:

Scott Cummings: Cummings began by explaining that while he does not study international law, his work focuses on legal ethics, legal mobilization, and the role of lawyers in sustaining or undermining democracy. Much of his career, he noted, had been devoted to studying the affirmative role of lawyers in social movements and their contributions to advancing progressive democratic visions. That focus shifted decisively after two developments forced him to confront a darker side of the legal profession. The first was the attack on the 2020 United States election, which exposed the central role lawyers played in efforts to systematically undermine a core democratic institution. What struck him was not that lawyers had done harmful things before, but the brazen and coordinated manner in which legal expertise was deployed to erode democratic norms, prompting him to study what he terms the "authors of autocracy": lawyers who design, draft, and defend laws that weaken democratic institutions and the rule of law.

The second turning point came through his research in Europe, where **Cummings** studied far right populism and its impact on the legal profession. While conducting fieldwork in Hungary and Poland, including interviews with dozens of lawyers, he sought to understand democratic backsliding through the lens of legal practice, holding Europe up as a mirror for a future the United States should seek to avoid. By 2023, however, political developments at home, particularly the return of Donald Trump to power and the rapid "flooding of the zone" with executive action in early 2025, led him to realize that the United States itself had become the central site for studying law and authoritarianism. In response, he wrote about what he described as an autocratic legal playbook, drawing lessons from Europe to explain how law is strategically used to consolidate power in the United States.

At the core of this playbook, **Cummings** explained, is a coherent strategy that appears across different national contexts. Democratically elected leaders seeking permanent and unchecked power must dismantle institutional guardrails designed to constrain them. This process involves capturing courts, government legal offices such as public prosecutors, independent centers of knowledge like universities, and the media. Crucially, it also requires capturing the independent legal sector itself, including law firms, nonprofit rights organizations, and bar associations. Control of law is the crown jewel of contemporary autocracy because once leaders can define the law without resistance, legal accountability effectively disappears.

Cummings emphasized that this autocratic legal strategy is not confined within national borders. It circulates through transnational legal networks, with the United States now functioning both as a major importer and exporter of ideas about how to weaponize law for authoritarian ends. This transnational diffusion underscores the importance of international institutions in what he described as "reverse engineering" the autocratic playbook. Rather than reacting after democratic damage has occurred, international actors can pursue proactive legal reforms that strengthen democratic resilience, particularly by safeguarding professional independence.

Drawing on his recent work, **Cummings** highlighted the growing role of civil society organizations dedicated to promoting the rule of law and protecting the independence of the legal profession. In the United States, groups such as Protect Democracy, Project Democracy, and Democracy Forward have built strong connections with international professional networks to address vulnerabilities in legal regulation and institutional authority. Through these networks, he has collaborated with organizations like the Dutch Bar to develop standards that protect government lawyers from executive branch capture, a phenomenon he argued has become increasingly visible in the United States, particularly within the Department of Justice. He pointed to instances in which lawyers

have authored legal memoranda to justify actions such as the prosecution of political opponents, extraordinary renditions, and other unlawful practices, illustrating how authoritarian projects rely on legal legitimation.

He also described his engagement with the International Bar Association and similar bodies that focus on preventing attacks against national and local bar associations. He noted that the American Bar Association has faced sustained political retaliation for publicly defending the rule of law, including threats to its funding, accreditation authority, and individual members. These developments, he argued, demonstrate why international coordination is essential to prevent such targeting strategies from spreading across borders.

Cummings concluded by stressing the importance of international standards in guiding collective responses to democratic erosion. In particular, he highlighted the Council of Europe's Convention for the Protection of the Profession of Lawyer, adopted in 2024, which affirms the independence of lawyers, protects them from retaliation for advocacy, and safeguards the autonomy of professional associations, including in the regulation of government lawyers. He observed that had such a convention been in force in the United States earlier, recent executive actions targeting law firms for representing political opponents would have been clearly unlawful under its standards. While similar actions have been challenged domestically under constitutional law, he emphasized that international conventions play a critical role in setting norms and regulatory frameworks, especially in contexts where domestic protections are weak or under attack and are therefore essential tools for protecting the legal profession in a moment of democratic vulnerability.

Saira Mohamed: Mohamed framed international institutions broadly, arguing that they should not be understood only as formal organizations such as the United Nations or NATO, but also as legal regimes, human rights law, and domestic institutions with

transnational significance, including the media, universities, and the legal profession. In this sense, international institutions encompass both legal norms and the structures that sustain them across borders.

Mohamed located the origin of these institutions in the failures of domestic systems before and during World War II, when states proved unable to curb colonialism, systemic racism, aggression, exploitation, and mass violence. International institutions were therefore created to make states responsive to rules beyond their own domestic orders and, in some cases, accountable for serious wrongdoing. Their purpose was not merely coordination or procedure, but the construction of a transnational framework for imagining political life as governed by something other than raw power.

She emphasized that international institutions are fundamentally normative projects. They embody commitments to ideals such as human dignity, peace, and human rights, even when they fail to realize those commitments in practice. Acknowledging that international institutions are deeply flawed and often reproduce power hierarchies rooted in colonialism and racism, **Mohamed** nonetheless argued that their aspirational character remains essential. The persistence of these aspirations matters precisely because a political order governed primarily by coercion leaves little room for hope.

She contrasted this normative vision with contemporary forms of governance increasingly driven by coercion, including in the United States. Against this backdrop, she argued that international institutions continue to offer an alternative framework grounded in ideals about how states should act and how people should be treated.

Mohamed concluded by stressing that international institutions should be understood less as guarantees of success and more as vehicles for articulating shared aspirations. Even when they fall short, they provide a language and structure for resisting rule by pure power and for sustaining the possibility that international and domestic orders can be governed by principles other than domination, such as the rule of law and human rights.

Jaya Ramji-Nogales: Ramji-Nogales focused on migration and international law as a central site where contemporary challenges to democracy are most visible. She argued that migrants in the United States have long lived under conditions that do not resemble democracy, and that recent developments reflect a deepening authoritarian turn rather than an abrupt rupture. Drawing on frameworks used to identify authoritarianism, she emphasized that these dynamics increasingly affect not only undocumented migrants but also lawful permanent residents and even U.S. citizens who are racialized as migrants because of their skin color, religion, or perceived national origin.

Ramji-Nogales described an executive posture that treats itself as above the law and disregards basic legal norms, pointing to deportations carried out despite judicial protection orders, the racialized vilification of political opponents and entire nations, and the deliberate incitement of violence through official rhetoric. These dynamics, she argued, are reinforced by aggressive enforcement practices in U.S. cities, where federal agents operate as though in a war zone, escalating confrontation rather than minimizing harm. Such practices normalize violence while shielding those responsible from accountability.

She further highlighted the weaponization of immigration law as a tool of repression, including the suppression of migrant speech and political expression. She pointed to cases in which lawful residents are punished for their speech and denied meaningful constitutional protections until the conclusion of immigration proceedings, despite the fact that immigration courts lack authority to adjudicate constitutional claims. **Ramji-Nogales** also described the growing practice of migrants being detained or removed when they appear in court seeking asylum or other relief, transforming legal processes meant to provide protection into mechanisms of enforcement and fear.

Turning to international law, she argued that while domestic legal systems are central to these harms, international institutions have also failed migrants in fundamental ways.

Large numbers of people on the move remain only weakly governed by international law, as legal regimes that might be expected to offer protection, including human rights law, the law of the sea, and trade law, are either silent on migration or excessively deferential to state sovereignty. Human rights law, she noted, attaches to migrants, but its content is limited, offering no right to enter another country, no meaningful protection of territorial security after long residence, and only weak procedural guarantees in administrative immigration proceedings.

Ramji-Nogales acknowledged that refugee law represents one area where international law has some enforcement power but emphasized that it is an extremely narrow framework that excludes many people in need of protection and requires individuals to undertake dangerous journeys to reach a border before any rights can be claimed. Similarly, transnational criminal law addressing smuggling and trafficking has legal force, but it operates through a carceral logic that prioritizes punishment over migrant safety and fails to address the structural conditions driving migration.

Ramji-Nogales concluded by emphasizing that the cumulative effect of these gaps is to leave migration almost entirely to state discretion, with little meaningful international constraint. From a theoretical perspective, she argued that this exposes a deeper tension at the heart of sovereignty itself. Human rights treaties are agreements among sovereigns, yet sovereignty is defined through the exclusion of migrants, who function as the "other" against which citizenship and national belonging are constructed. Without migrants, she suggested, sovereignty loses its meaning, revealing a fundamental contradiction that international law has yet to resolve.

Lauren van Schilfgaarde: Van Schilfgaarde examined the relationship between international law and Indigenous rights through the lens of U.S. federal Indian law, arguing that for Indigenous peoples, challenges to democracy are neither new nor exceptional. Drawing on her experience teaching and studying federal Indian law, she described it as

a field that has long operated outside the rule of law, where outcomes are unpredictable and rationales are often constructed opportunistically. In this context, she suggested that international law offers a critical alternative framework for understanding and challenging the structural failures of domestic law as it applies to Indigenous peoples.

Van Schilfgaarde illustrated these failures through recent U.S. Supreme Court cases. In *Haaland v. Brackeen* (2023), the Court upheld the Indian Child Welfare Act, but on the troubling rationale that Congress possesses nearly absolute plenary power over Indian affairs, a logic that also constitutionalizes deeply harmful actions taken against Indigenous peoples in the past. In *Arizona v. Navajo Nation*, the Court held that the federal government has no enforceable obligation to quantify or secure water rights for the Navajo Nation, despite acknowledging a trust responsibility that is supposed to define the federal–tribal relationship. She emphasized that this exposes a core contradiction: the existence of trust obligations without any meaningful enforcement mechanism. She further pointed to the ongoing litigation over the proposed destruction of the San Carlos Apache sacred site Oak Flat, where U.S. law has failed to recognize the destruction of a sacred site as a cognizable harm to Indigenous religion, underscoring the limits of domestic legal remedies.

Acknowledging that international law is itself constrained by its state centric structure and often offers clumsy or incomplete remedies for Indigenous peoples, **van Schilfgaarde** nonetheless identified areas of growing promise. She highlighted developments within the Human Rights Committee's interpretation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, particularly Article 27 on cultural rights, where international jurisprudence has begun to recognize the destruction of sacred sites as a form of legal harm. However, she noted a persistent limitation in this framework, namely its focus on individual rather than collective harm, which fails to fully capture the nature of Indigenous injury.

She identified the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as a transformative intervention in international law. UNDRIP, she argued, represents the result of decades of Indigenous advocacy and is significant not only for its substantive principles but also for the way it incorporates Indigenous participation within international decision making. Its recognition of Indigenous peoples as collective rights holders challenges the traditional binary of states and individuals that has long defined international law. By affirming collective rights, self-determination, and free, prior, and informed consent, UNDRIP opens space for alternative understandings of sovereignty that are not exclusively tied to statehood.

Van Schilfgaarde emphasized that self-determination, long monopolized by states, acquires real meaning in UNDRIP as a collective right that applies to Indigenous peoples regardless of whether they constitute a state. Free, prior, and informed consent offers a concrete expression of self-determination and exposes the democratic deficit faced by Indigenous nations in the United States, which lack formal representation in federal institutions despite the federal government's trust responsibilities toward them. She argued that reliance on lobbying as a substitute for representation is fundamentally inadequate and inconsistent with international norms.

Van Schilfgaarde concluded by suggesting that international law provides a crucial vocabulary for identifying and articulating the structural gaps in domestic legal systems. While it does not offer complete solutions, it clarifies what is missing in U.S. law and democracy when it comes to Indigenous peoples, helping to define the demands for institutional reform and collective representation that domestic frameworks have consistently failed to address.

After the four panelists spoke, **Romano** intervened by observing that a common theme across the panel was the recurring question of what international law and international institutions can realistically do in the face of current democratic crises. He rejected the

idea that the present moment represents a sudden or radical rupture in the international order caused by recent U.S. political developments. Instead, he argued that what has occurred is the collapse of long sustained illusions. The international order, in his view, had not been working well for decades, but was maintained through the belief that it was better than nothing.

Romano emphasized that the United States has kept international law at arm's length for the past sixty years, regardless of which political party controlled the White House, and that there has been no fundamental shift in attitude toward international law over that period. He illustrated this continuity through U.S. treatment of Native American peoples, pointing to the execution of a Navajo tribal member who became the only Native American person on federal death row due to a jurisdictional technicality that removed him from tribal law. He noted that even when international bodies later found human rights violations, U.S. authorities failed to acknowledge or respond to those findings.

From this perspective, **Romano** argued that the current moment should be understood not as a collapse, but as an opportunity. With pretense abandoned, there is now space for serious reflection on what kind of international order should be built. He concluded by stressing that any future international order must be explicitly grounded in values. Law may appear neutral, but without a core commitment to dignity, universality, respect for people, and respect for the sovereignty of others, legal systems will simply reproduce the same failures.

The panel then fielded questions from the audience. The first question was about whether the treatment of Indigenous rights as collective rights, rather than purely individual rights, creates an additional barrier to the recognition of Indigenous sovereignty and, in particular, to the effective exercise of the right to self-determination. It pointed to a recurring critique that collective Indigenous rights are framed as "special rights," allegedly violating principles of equality and nondiscrimination, and asked whether this framing

helps explain why Indigenous peoples continue to face heightened obstacles in securing recognition of their political and territorial rights.

Lauren van Schilfgaarde responded by rejecting the idea that collective Indigenous rights are "special rights" or an exception to equality. Instead, she explained that this framing, which is particularly prevalent in the United States, often misunderstands the nature of Indigenous rights. Rather than granting exceptional privileges, collective rights represent a necessary recognition of Indigenous peoples as political and cultural communities with distinct relationships to land, language, and collective identity. She emphasized that denying such recognition would itself constitute a form of discrimination, as equality under human rights law requires acknowledging the specific conditions necessary for Indigenous peoples to maintain their existence as distinct communities.

Van Schilfgaarde noted that both international and domestic legal systems have the capacity to accommodate collective Indigenous rights, and that international human rights law has played a critical role in articulating and legitimizing these protections. She highlighted the distinction in U.S. law between race and political status, explaining that tribal citizenship reflects a political relationship grounded in sovereignty rather than a purely racial classification, although she acknowledged that this framework remains vulnerable to legal and political challenges. More broadly, she observed that human rights law has increasingly embraced group rights, including the right to self-determination recognized in international instruments such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

She further emphasized the important role of the Inter-American human rights system in advancing innovative approaches to collective rights, particularly by interpreting traditionally individual rights in ways that reflect the collective dimensions of Indigenous identity and harm. She pointed to developments in reparations jurisprudence as an

example of how international human rights law has demonstrated creativity and progress in addressing structural injustices affecting Indigenous communities. She concluded that these developments reflect the evolving capacity of international law to recognize collective rights and to support continued growth and transformation in the protection of Indigenous peoples.

Saira Mohamed intervened by emphasizing that one of the central structural challenges in advancing group rights within international law is the continued primacy of state sovereignty. She explained that while the human rights framework aspires to place human dignity at its core, international law remains a system created and governed by states, which prioritize maintaining authority over their territory and populations. As a result, the recognition and full realization of collective rights often requires states to relinquish aspects of their sovereign power, making meaningful progress difficult to achieve. She noted that as long as states remain the primary makers of international law and seek to preserve territorial and political control, the scope and effectiveness of group rights will remain limited and contingent on state preferences.

The second question raised from the public was:

How do you address the disparity of migrant rights and their championing by international institutions, including institutions like corporations?

Jaya Ramji-Nogales responded by insisting that, despite the bleak global moment for migrants' rights, there are meaningful sites of legal innovation outside the UN-centered multilateral system. She pointed to regional frameworks as the most promising spaces, highlighting broader refugee definitions in the Inter-American and African systems that allow group-based protection, as well as free-movement regimes in South America, West Africa, and East Africa that permit cross-border mobility for work and education without individualized justifications. Her core claim was that mobility is being addressed most

effectively where law reflects regional realities rather than treating migration as an exception governed by narrow asylum rules.

When the discussion turned to corporate power, **Lauren van Schilfgaarde** framed the issue as structural and historical rather than novel. She emphasized that concentrated capital has long been intertwined with state authority and questioned why legal systems so readily recognize corporations as full legal people while treating collective rights with suspicion. She suggested that international law already contains partial tools for moving beyond the state–individual binary, pointing to the International Labour Organization's tripartite structure as an imperfect but important recognition that corporations and workers are central legal actors, even if enforcement remains weak.

Jaya Ramji-Nogales added a warning drawn from the migration context, arguing that one of the most urgent governance gaps concerns digital technologies used against migrants, including biometrics, facial recognition, and data sharing systems. She stressed that questions of consent, privacy, storage, and transnational data circulation remain unregulated, with governments and international institutions consistently lagging behind corporate technological capacity.

Scott Cummings reframed the corporate question through the lens of democratic backsliding. He contrasted the first Trump administration, when many corporations publicly defended legal regularity, with a newer pattern of rapid accommodation, transactional loyalty, and pay-to-play politics. In his account, the danger is that business elites cease to act as stabilizing forces for democratic institutions and instead align themselves with authoritarian power, turning law into a mechanism for enrichment rather than constraint.

Saira Mohamed reinforced this by emphasizing that corporate accountability remains a major unresolved challenge in both international human rights law and international criminal law. She noted that debates about corporate liability date back to the Nuremberg

trials, yet international criminal law still faces significant barriers to prosecuting corporate actors, particularly due to the high evidentiary standards required to establish causal contribution and mens rea. These legal thresholds make it difficult to directly hold corporations accountable for their role in facilitating human rights abuses.

She explained, however, that pockets of human rights law have developed stronger doctrines of state responsibility for the actions of private actors, especially when private companies perform traditionally public functions. These frameworks can create pathways to address corporate complicity by focusing on the obligations of states to regulate and prevent abuses. At the same time, she cautioned that these developments operate at the level of legal standards for states and do not necessarily change corporate behavior in practice, highlighting the need for additional mechanisms to ensure meaningful accountability.

An attendee of the event then asked:

Is there an internal debate within international legal scholarship between more optimistic views of international law as an effective system and more critical perspectives, particularly from the Global South, that see it as limited or even complicit in systems of power; and if so, how should we understand that tension?

Saira Mohamed responded that both descriptions are accurate. International institutions were built through histories of imperialism and exclusion, yet they can still operate as sources of protection, dignity, and hope. She rejected the idea that these tensions invalidate international law, arguing instead that they define it.

Jaya Ramji-Nogales echoed this view, emphasizing that international law cannot be treated as an unqualified good, especially as the rules-based order fractures. At the same time, she warned against stopping at critique alone, urging the panel to treat the current

moment as an opportunity to ask what should be built next rather than merely diagnosing failure.

Scott Cummings extended this tension beyond international law, noting that similar debates exist within domestic legal institutions. Drawing on social movement theory, he argued that progressive legal work requires holding two commitments at once: defending institutions against capture while remaining clear-eyed about their limitations. Abandoning institutions altogether, he warned, creates openings for powerful actors to exploit them unchecked.

Dr. Albert Barume intervened by acknowledging that international law is not a perfect system and that it contains inherent flaws and limitations. He agreed that international law alone cannot resolve all global injustices but emphasized that its effectiveness depends on the degree to which states and societies choose to give it meaningful weight. He noted that one of the key challenges in the United States is the limited integration of international law into domestic legal practice and political culture, particularly when compared to many European and civil law jurisdictions.

Dr. Barume explained that in numerous countries, especially those with civil law traditions, international conventions automatically become part of domestic law once ratified, allowing courts, lawyers, and institutions to rely directly on international legal principles. This integration reinforces the authority and legitimacy of international law, shaping legal reasoning and public expectations. By contrast, he observed that in the United States, international law often lacks the same level of domestic incorporation and practical influence, which contributes to skepticism about its relevance and effectiveness.

He concluded by framing the present moment not as a reason for pessimism, but as an opportunity to strengthen the role of international law. He emphasized the importance of education, advocacy, and legal engagement to ensure that international legal principles are better understood and more fully integrated into domestic systems. In his view,

international law was originally developed to constrain the abuse of power and protect human dignity, and its continued relevance depends on the willingness of legal actors, institutions, and societies to actively uphold and apply its principles.

Jaya Ramji-Nogales concluded the interventions by emphasizing the paradoxical relationship between the United States and international law, noting that although Americans helped shape the modern human rights system, international treaties do not automatically become enforceable domestically due to the doctrine of non-self-execution. She explained that even after Senate ratification, treaties often require implementing legislation and may be overridden by later statutes, a limitation rooted in historical resistance to extending international rights protections to marginalized groups, including African Americans and Native Americans. She suggested that the current moment presents an opportunity to rethink how the United States approaches international law and to strengthen its domestic implementation so that it can function as a meaningful constraint on state power and a tool for advancing human rights.

Following these questions, the panel was then opened for a short Rapid-Fire Question Round:

First Question: What does it mean to talk about values in the age of globalization where accusations against globalism have led to right wing populism, where some of the principles that are associated with liberalism have led to these right-wing movements? What are the values we should champion? Where does the authority for law lie? AND
Second Question: How should international students that are hopeful US citizens navigate freedom of speech?

On values and authority, **Scott Cummings** emphasized the independent legal profession as a core democratic safeguard, warning that when legal authority collapses into personal loyalty to executive power, law ceases to function as law. On speech and vulnerability for non-citizen and naturalized lawyers, panelists stressed that there is no universal formula.

Jaya Ramji-Nogales framed the decision to speak as a context-specific risk assessment, while underscoring that law is not owned by institutions alone and that lawyers and social movements shape its meaning.

Saira Mohamed closed this part of the exchange by emphasizing that the source of authority for human rights law in the United States remains fragile, in part because of a widespread lack of understanding of human rights as law. She noted that, unlike in many other countries, human rights law is not deeply integrated into legal education or public consciousness, and even basic awareness of its domestic relevance is often missing. For that reason, she urged the importance of placing human rights law at the center of legal training and practice, particularly for law students, as a necessary step toward strengthening its authority and ensuring that its principles meaningfully constrain power.

Panel Three: Future World Order(s) and the Meaning of Human Rights (3:15 - 4:30pm)

Guiding Theme: This panel closes the symposium with a dynamic, thought-provoking, and forward-looking dialogue about the future world order(s) and the role of human rights therein. Panelists will discuss how frameworks like the United Nations Charter might evolve for our future world, addressing rising authoritarianism, generational value shifts, technological advancements, and ecological survival. Drawing upon the symposium's theme, this panel will grapple with a central question offering critique and inspiration along the way — is there a role for human rights in our collective future?

Moderator: Anna Spain Bradley, MacArthur Foundation Chair in International Justice and Human Rights, Professor of Law and Faculty Director, The Promise Institute for Human Rights at UCLA (with locations at UCLA School of Law and in Europe)

Panel 3 Speakers:

- **Cheryl Harris,** Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Professor in Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, UCLA Law
- **Obiora Okafor,** Edward B. Burling Chair in International Law, Faculty Co-Lead, Governance, Politics, and Society Focus Area, Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies
- **Sophie Richardson**, Co-Executive Director, Network of Chinese Human Rights Defenders

The panel was opened by the moderator who made a brief introduction of each of the speakers on the panel, and centered the discussion on: What does the global order look like in the future? and What will/should it become?

Sophie Richardson opened the panel by thanking the Special Rapporteur and urging scholars, governments, and advocates to continue calling out human rights abuses and expressing solidarity with those resisting repression. She focused her remarks on the ongoing human rights crisis in China, emphasizing that the Chinese government has committed widespread and systematic violations, including atrocity crimes, while simultaneously working to undermine international human rights institutions and limit their ability to hold states accountable. She explained that Beijing has sought to exclude independent actors from these forums, restrict access to UN mechanisms such as Special Procedures, and weaken the credibility of international accountability processes.

Richardson underscored that, despite these challenges, Chinese human rights lawyers and activists continue to rely on international human rights law as one of the few avenues available to seek justice, often at extraordinary personal risk, including imprisonment and torture. She noted that these advocates have attempted to use international treaties and mechanisms to advance protections for women's rights, equality, and fundamental freedoms, even as domestic courts remain subordinated to the political authority of the Chinese Communist Party. She emphasized that international institutions, while imperfect, remain essential for individuals and communities whose governments deny them legal remedies, pointing to universal jurisdiction cases abroad (such as those in Argentina) as rare but critical pathways for accountability. **Richardson** concluded by stressing that the continued courage of those who turn to international law under such conditions is a powerful reminder of the importance of preserving and strengthening international human rights institutions as tools of resistance and justice.

Obiora Okafor followed by reflecting on the broader discussion about continuity and change in international law, emphasizing that while the current moment may appear unprecedented, many of today's tensions reflect longer historical patterns. He described international law as an enduring and valuable tool; one that has always been shaped by power, but also capable of being used creatively to advance justice and self-determination. Rather than viewing the present as a complete rupture, he encouraged a long historical perspective that recognizes both continuity and transformation, particularly in the context of shifting global power and the gradual decline and reconfiguration of empires.

Okafor stressed that international law does not operate in isolation but is influenced by broader political, economic, and institutional structures, including financial systems and global governance arrangements. He suggested that meaningful transformation will require not only legal reform but also structural changes that can counterbalance concentrated power. At the same time, he cautioned against replacing one form of domination with another, underscoring that the goal should be to build a more just and democratic international order. He concluded by reaffirming that international law and human rights remain essential tools (though not sufficient on their own) for advancing accountability, justice, and more equitable global governance.

Cheryl Harris reflected on her political formation as a child of the 1960s, describing a period marked by global upheaval and resistance, from civil rights struggles in the United States to anti-colonial movements across the Global South. She emphasized that these movements challenged not only specific injustices but the legitimacy of the prevailing global order itself, rejecting the idea that inclusion within existing structures was sufficient. Instead, she explained, the Black liberation struggle in the United States was understood as inseparable from broader struggles against imperialism, conquest, and global systems of racial and economic domination. This perspective revealed that racial justice could not

be confined within national borders, but was fundamentally tied to global questions of power, extraction, and structural inequality.

Harris highlighted Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1967 speech *Beyond Vietnam* as a defining articulation of this broader vision. In that speech, King argued that militarism, racism, and economic exploitation were interconnected, and that war abroad undermined the possibility of justice at home. He insisted that meaningful social transformation required a profound reordering of values; from a society organized around profit, property, and material accumulation to one centered on human dignity. **Harris** underscored that King and other thinkers understood the fight against racial oppression as inseparable from opposition to imperialism and global economic exploitation, recognizing that systems of domination operated across national boundaries.

She connected this historical vision to contemporary debates about international order, cautioning against framing current transformations as entirely new when they often reproduce longstanding patterns of hierarchy and selective application of legal and economic rules. Drawing on recent critiques from leaders in the Global South, including Barbados' Prime Minister Mia Mottley, **Harris** noted how global economic and legal systems continue to constrain the sovereignty of smaller nations while privileging the mobility of capital over the mobility and well-being of people. She argued that migration, inequality, and authoritarianism cannot be understood in isolation from the global economic structures that produce them.

Harris concluded by emphasizing the continued relevance of King's call to center justice, anti-racism, and anti-imperialism in any vision of a future international order. She suggested that while existing legal and institutional frameworks are deeply flawed, they remain sites of struggle that can be used to pursue transformative change. The challenge, she argued, is to simultaneously confront structural injustice while working within and

against existing institutions, recognizing the tension between critique and engagement as an unavoidable but necessary part of building a more just and equitable world order.

Addressing the discussion, **Anna Spain Bradley** asked the panelists:

What are common shared values, and how do they affect power? And what is the key to building solidarity across diverse generations and values, considering the recent youth movements in Asia for example?

Obiora Okafor intervened by noting that international solidarity as a practice that begins with listening rather than prescription. He stressed that human rights cannot be understood as a Western export and pointed to the African Charter of 1981 as an early and decisive articulation of collective rights, including the right to a healthy environment, well before similar recognition in global instruments. For **Okafor**, solidarity depends on inclusive participation in norm making and on taking seriously voices from outside traditional centers of power. He warned against assuming that contemporary movements are entirely new, emphasizing that human rights struggles repeat across generations and that repression is a constant feature of state responses. While acknowledging the leadership and courage of younger generations, he argued that history must inform activism, since earlier movements faced similar cycles of hope, violence, and retrenchment. Meaningful solidarity therefore requires attention to youth energy while remaining grounded in historical experience.

Spain Bradley redirected the discussion to **Sophie Richardson** by asking about China's growing power and the likely massive role that it will play in crafting the new global order.

Richardson responded by situating the discussion within the lived political reality inside China, emphasizing how deeply entrenched one-party rule has become. She noted that the People's Republic of China is only slightly younger than the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, meaning that most people in the country have never experienced an

alternative political system. As a result, explicit calls for democratic change or leadership resignation have been extremely rare since the Tiananmen protests of 1989. However, she pointed to the recent protests against strict COVID-19 lockdown measures as a significant moment of public dissent, led largely by young people. These demonstrations were remarkable not only for their scale but also for their symbolic creativity, as many participants held up blank sheets of paper. In a context of pervasive state surveillance and censorship, the blank page became a powerful form of expression, conveying dissent without words and exposing both the limits of permissible speech and the courage of those willing to challenge state authority.

Richardson also referenced *Charter 08*, a pro-democracy manifesto authored by Chinese intellectuals and lawyers, which called for political reform, participation, and accountability. She highlighted the risks faced by its authors, including imprisonment and death in detention, underscoring the severe consequences of advocating for basic political rights. She explained that the persistent denial of participation and accountability has shaped contemporary forms of resistance among younger generations. One example is the phenomenon known as "lying flat," in which individuals disengage from academic, professional, and social systems as a form of quiet protest, withdrawing from structures they perceive as unresponsive and unjust. This form of disengagement reflects both political constraint and a broader sense of disillusionment.

More broadly, **Richardson** argued that this skepticism is not limited to China but reflects a global crisis of confidence in institutions. Younger generations around the world are increasingly aware of the failures of governments, corporations, and international institutions to respond effectively to major crises, including inequality, violence, and climate change. While she expressed encouragement at the depth of Gen Z's commitment to human rights and accountability, she also acknowledged uncertainty about how institutions will respond to these demands. She concluded by emphasizing the urgency

of this moment, warning that failure to respond meaningfully to these calls for dignity and participation risks deepening disengagement and undermining the legitimacy of institutions that claim to uphold human rights.

Moderator **Anna Spain Bradley** directed a question to **Cheryl Harris**, noting that she had witnessed many different social movements throughout her life, and asked what advice she would offer to those seeking to speak truth to power and give voice to injustice.

Cheryl Harris responded by emphasizing that there is no simple or prescriptive answer to how individuals should speak truth to power, because social movements emerge within broader historical processes that cannot be fully anticipated or controlled. Reflecting on her own experiences, including encounters shaped by global struggles such as South African liberation, she underscored the importance of education as a central tool for resistance and transformation. She explained that culture plays a critical role in this process, not merely as a reflection of political struggle but as an organic form of instruction and political expression itself. In many contexts, including repressive environments, culture allows ideas of resistance, dignity, and alternative futures to circulate even when formal political expression is restricted. She recalled how movements integrated cultural expression, music, poetry, and everyday forms of communication into political resistance, demonstrating that culture and political action are deeply intertwined rather than separate domains.

Harris further argued that education must be understood in a broader, democratic sense, extending beyond classrooms and formal legal instruction. She stressed the importance of peer-to-peer education, where individuals learn from one another and collectively develop the tools necessary to understand injustice and imagine alternatives. She noted that many transformative social movements gained strength through these decentralized and participatory forms of learning, which allowed people to sustain themselves during crises and to envision different social and political orders. Rather than waiting for

institutions or formal authorities to provide knowledge or leadership, she emphasized that people must recognize their own capacity to produce knowledge and organize collectively. Ultimately, **Harris** highlighted that building resistance requires nurturing culture, expanding democratic forms of education, and creating participatory spaces where people can listen, learn, and empower one another. In this sense, democratic education becomes both a means of resistance and a foundation for imagining and constructing more just institutional and political futures.

The panel was later open for questions of the attendees:

International order was largely created to protect countries rather than people; is sovereignty an important consideration for creating this new international order? Or should we move on from ideas of sovereignty?

Cheryl Harris responded by reflecting on the historical complexity of sovereignty and its relationship to power, emphasizing that sovereignty has never been a neutral or purely protective concept. Drawing on the example of the British and Dutch East India Companies, she explained that colonial domination was initially driven by private corporate power, backed by military force, and only later formalized and nationalized by states. This history, she suggested, reveals that sovereignty itself has often emerged from and been shaped by processes of domination rather than serving as a safeguard for self-determination. For that reason, she cautioned against assuming that sovereignty alone guarantees justice or autonomy, noting that many sovereign states have failed to protect the self-determination of their own peoples.

At the same time, **Harris** acknowledged that sovereignty remains an essential tool within the international system, particularly for less powerful states whose legal and political resources are otherwise limited. However, she argued that it is necessary to move beyond treating sovereignty as a fixed or absolute object and instead understand it as a dynamic process connected to broader questions of self-determination. This requires rethinking

the subject of self-determination itself, not merely as an individual within rigid national borders, but as peoples, communities, and collectives whose political agency may not align neatly with state boundaries. Ultimately, she emphasized that while sovereignty continues to play an important role, achieving meaningful self-determination requires a deeper reimagining of political structures and legal frameworks beyond traditional state-centered models.

Obiora Okafor, responding to the same question, argued that a central issue is identifying who is actively reshaping sovereignty and to what ends. He emphasized that sovereignty is not simply disappearing on its own, but is being strategically reconfigured, manipulated, and redeployed by powerful actors to serve particular political and economic interests. This, he suggested, raises critical questions about whose sovereignty is protected, whose is undermined, and how sovereignty can be reclaimed or reimagined in ways that genuinely support self-determination rather than reinforce existing hierarchies of power.

The panel then addressed the following questions from the public:

Looking at the origin of America, what soul did America have to preserve in the first place?
What are the ties between technology and human rights? What role will quantum data play in the future world order?
Is social media an aid or a threat to social movements and human rights advocacy?

Addressing the two questions directed at her comments, **Cheryl Harris** reflected first on the question of America's soul by drawing on William Patterson's distinction between government and country, as well as Thurgood Marshall's refusal to celebrate the anniversary of the Declaration of Independence while serving on the Supreme Court. Marshall explained that rather than celebrating the birth of the nation as a political entity, he celebrated the struggle of the people to make its promises real. **Harris** invoked this distinction to emphasize that the founding of the United States in 1776 marked the

creation of a governance structure, one that was flawed from the beginning, but did not fully represent the aspirations, struggles, and lived realities of its people. For **Harris**, the critical question is not answered by looking to governments alone, but by attending to the aspirations and efforts of people themselves, and by recognizing that international law and political legitimacy must ultimately be grounded in those collective struggles rather than in formal structures of authority.

Turning to the question of social media and technological power, **Harris** stressed that there is no turning back from the transformative role these infrastructures now play in shaping political and social life. The "genie is out of the bottle," and the task ahead is not to eliminate these tools but to confront the consolidation of power embedded within their infrastructure. She described these systems as tools that are currently being grossly misused and that exert hegemonic influence over how people think, communicate, and organize. As such, **Harris** argued that the challenge moving forward is to rethink how these technological infrastructures are governed and used, and to develop alternative frameworks that can restrain their power and allow them to serve more democratic and less destructive purposes

Sophie Richardson acknowledged that her views had recently made her unpopular among some members of the Chinese human rights community, particularly regarding debates over whether TikTok should be forced to sell or shut down in the United States due to its ownership by the Chinese parent company ByteDance. While some viewed the forced sale as a victory against the influence of the Chinese state, **Richardson** emphasized that she does not believe the problem is fundamentally about national ownership. Instead, she argued that these technology companies, regardless of whether they are based in authoritarian or democratic systems, wield extraordinary power, operate with significant impunity, and generate enormous profits while shaping political discourse and public life on a massive scale.

At the same time, **Richardson** acknowledged that social media platforms have created unprecedented opportunities for expression, organization, and political participation, particularly in highly surveilled environments such as China, where users have developed creative ways to circumvent censorship and communicate dissenting ideas. However, she warned that these same platforms have also facilitated grave harms, pointing to their role in accelerating and amplifying atrocities such as the Rohingya genocide in Myanmar. For **Richardson**, the core concern is not simply who owns these platforms, but the vast, unchecked power they possess and the lack of meaningful accountability governing their use. She expressed deep concern about the concentration of this power and stressed the urgent need to rethink how these platforms are structured, regulated, and constrained, as their influence transcends political systems and poses profound risks to human rights and democratic accountability worldwide.

Obiora Okafor returned to the need for structural analysis, urging that technology governance must always ask who controls resources, who benefits, and who is displaced. Without confronting these questions, he warned technological regulation risks becoming another arena where power is shifted rather than redistributed.

In closing, **Anna Spain Bradley** emphasized that the future of global order depends on how societies negotiate the relationship between values and power in a world of immense inequality. She acknowledged the deep flaws and historical complicities of international law but insisted that the pursuit of an order grounded in dignity, solidarity, and community remains essential. She highlighted that everyone on the panel and in the audience is engaged in the difficult work of imagining a more just future. Drawing on the words of poet and activist Nikki Giovanni, she concluded by suggesting that humanity's survival depends on moving beyond rigid hierarchies of race and gender and rethinking what it means to be human. The future of world order, she argued, turns on whether

societies are willing to confront power honestly while holding fast to shared values of human worth.

Closing Remarks (4:30-4:45pm)

Speaker: Anna Spain Bradley, MacArthur Foundation Chair in International Justice and Human Rights, Professor of Law and Faculty Director, The Promise Institute for Human Rights at UCLA

Anna Spain Bradley concluded the event by reflecting on the purpose and significance of the gathering. She emphasized that the symposium had brought participants together at a particular historical moment to engage deeply with urgent questions about the future of international law, human rights, and global order. It was an opportunity not only to exchange ideas, but to fully immerse themselves in critical reflection, to understand where we stand today, and to consider collectively the paths that lie ahead.

Spain Bradley also underscored that the symposium represented a broader intellectual and moral commitment: a commitment to remembering the past honestly and critically, without simplifying its contradictions; to holding complexity rather than retreating into easy answers; and to advancing scholarship and practice oriented toward the public good. She framed the discussions as part of an ongoing responsibility to confront difficult histories, challenge existing structures, and contribute meaningfully to the pursuit of justice and human dignity.

Closing Performance Piece:
Poetry Reading by Moncho Ollin Alvarado (5:45pm)

Kate Mackintosh, Executive Director of The Promise Institute for Human Rights (Europe) introduced **Poet and Performance Artist: Moncho Ollin Alvarado** who gave an inspired reading of her poetry to close the symposium, including never-before published "palimpsest"-style poetry that used the removal of words from anti-trans laws to reclaim and recapture the remaining words as poetry. Her book, *Greyhound Americans*, is available here.

("Dazzlingly queer, inclusive, celestial, with indigenous ancestral heart, Greyhound Americans, by award winning poet Moncho Alvarado, confronts a family history of borderland politics by discovering a legacy of violence, grief, trauma, and survival through poems that have an unmistakable spirit, tenderness, intimacy, and humility.")

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