Book Review: Oppositional Arts in 1990s Syria

By Michael Page

Miriam cooke’s *Dissident Syria: Making Oppositional Arts Official*, sketches an intimate portrait of the Syrian artistic milieu and the works it produced in the mid-1990s twilight years of Hafiz al-Assad’s rule. Meeting with Syrian writers, sculptors, playwrights, and film directors, cooke analyzes their work through her concept of *commissioned criticism*, which she defines as “a state-sponsored practice that performs official accountability for the rosy rhetoric of slogans while attempting to convert real dissident practice into state ideology” (73). Through this framework, cooke not only underlines the precarious balance between collusion with the state and the very real penalties for transgressing its constantly shifting red lines (which every Syrian artist must navigate), but also the more general calculus of artistic compromise under authoritarian rule.

Cooke spent from autumn 1995 to spring 1996 in Syria, interviewing and getting to know a number of Syrian artists in a variety of fields. Through these interviews and meetings, cooke combines a detailed literary analysis of their works with a personal narrative of her interactions with these artists. These narrative interruptions are sometimes interesting, as they often highlight the level of distrust and fear present in Syrian society. In several instances, even intellectuals and artists are suspicious of her motives in studying the Syrian artistic scene, while concurrently bemoaning the fact that “our [Syrian] literature is not known abroad” (57). However, in other sections, the dialogue seems superfluous to the literature she is addressing, and adds less value for the reader.

*Dissident Syria* is organized thematically into eight sections. Chapter one is an analysis and critique of the Syrian government’s use of slogans as a mechanism for suppressing dissent. Cooke draws heavily from Vaclav Havel’s writing on life in Eastern Bloc Czechoslovakia to explain the Asad cult, interspersed with Syrian intellectuals’ reactions to this repressive atmosphere. In Chapters Two and Three, Syrian women writers are discussed, with a heavy focus on the author’s personal interactions with writers such as Houda Naamani and Colette al-Khoury. Chapter Four explains the concept of “commissioned criticism”, comparing it with Lisa Wedeen’s idea of “licensed criticism”, from her excellent work *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*. Cooke applies this concept in Chapters Five, Six, and Seven, which investigate Syrian theater, filmmaking, and the genre of “prison literature”. Chapter Eight concludes with a mostly personal account of her final days in Damascus. In terms of the book’s structure, cooke does not
introduce the concept of “commissioned criticism” until nearly halfway into the book, and it would be helpful to know why she does not use it as a framework for approaching Syrian women writer’s works.

When reading theories on how authoritarian regimes manage dissent such as cooke’s “commissioned criticism”, it is striking how authoritarian states such as Syria that appear incompetent and lacking in multiple arenas can be simultaneously ingenious and creative in manipulating, and indeed reenlisting, dissidence to serve their own ends. Cooke cites the Syrian National Film Organization (NFO) as a particularly salient example, in which dissidents produce critical films that are funded by the NFO, screened abroad, and awarded prizes at international festivals – strengthening the image of Syria as a country that respects free speech – while banning these same prize-winning films at home, or severely limiting their release.

Additionally, cooke suggests that this forced collusion with the state sews distrust between the masses and Syria’s intellectual and artistic elite - especially ‘Alawite artists. Cooke poignantly cites the example of the great Syrian playwright Sa’adallah Wannus who, dying of cancer, relied on government medical care while working on his final plays, and therefore “risked the charge that he was in [the Syrian government’s] pay and that his criticism had been licensed, that he had become a muharrij, or court jester” (98). However, it seems the Syrian public saw him as anything but, since cooke, referring to Wannus’ funeral, also asks: “Would seventy thousand people have attended the funeral of a court jester” (99)?

*Dissident Syria* makes numerous comparisons between Syria under Hafiz al-Asad’s rule with the U.S. under the Bush administration. Commenting on the role of outsiders in assisting dissidents in other countries, cooke writes, “The attention of outsiders can break the closed circuit between the actor and the one acted upon, between an authoritarian regime and its people, whether in 1990s Syria or in the twenty-first-century United States” (165). As worthy as the Bush administration may be for an expansive range of criticisms, it was not Syria under Hafiz al-Asad’s rule, which included the death of 10,000 to 20,000 citizens alone in destruction of the Syrian city of Hama in 1982. These comparisons detract from an otherwise worthwhile book – as do a few minor editing errors. (For example, cooke writes that Lebanese writer Samir Kassir was assassinated in June 2004, instead of June 2005.) Overall, miriam cooke’s *Dissident Syria* is a useful examination of Syrian artists’ struggle to produce critical works while on the one hand evading reenlistment by the Syrian regime to bolster its legitimacy, and on the other, avoiding the fate of many Syrian artists and dissidents: prison, or worse.

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