
Reviewed by Sumaira Nawaz

Political scientists and theorists have been trying to analyze the rise of populist leaders in developing countries with much interest and concern. Public support for authoritarian rule among ordinary citizens is not a regionally isolated phenomenon, and nor is it strictly premised on violent coercion, material patronage, or distinct ideological commitments. Embedded within this support is the question of social transformation—How are everyday desires and moments of dissent regimented to ensure regime survival? Is the state able to cultivate the same depth of emotional attachment and loyalty among its citizens? How do we understand the status of the “silent majority” in these contexts, those who do not acquiesce to authoritarian rule but hesitate to oppose its conventional order?

Lisa Wedeen in her latest contribution *Authoritarian Apprehensions* centers the case of Bashar al-Assad’s rule in Syria to investigate the simultaneous existence of fervent loyalty, deep ambivalence, and outright opposition to the Ba’th regime. Wedeen’s research question is straightforward: “what inclined people—and not simply the narrow group deriving obvious material benefit from the status quo—to stick to the kleptocracy they knew when the opportunity arose to (at least) entertain the idea of change” (3). The answer for her lies in ideology and how it intertwines with affect, “to produce an atmosphere in which for many the exercise of creative political judgement becomes all but impossible” (4). According to Wedeen, the first decade of Bashar al-Assad’s rule “ushered in an avowedly upbeat, modern, internet-savvy authoritarianism” that relied on “regime-organized market-inflected civil society organization” (x). This created a class of professional managerial elite whose styles of comportment and commercialized living were modelled to be aspirational by the regime (10). Drawing on Althusser, *Authoritarian Ambivalence* repurposes the concept of ideology for the present in order to underscore the collusion between the regime and market in Syria, rejecting the “sharp dichotomy between materialist and ideational approaches” (5).

The text initiates new scholarly conversations around inducements to compliance, shedding light on the “psychic and embodied processes that trigger mimetic identifications with persons and fetishised objects,” like glossy magazines, flashy fast cars, and most importantly the Syrian first family (16).

Wedeen begins by capturing the Assad regime’s turn to neoliberal autocracy and social market economy in the 1990s, which ushered a “kinder, gentler version” of autocracy (38). She lucidly describes how desires for market freedom, upward mobility, and consumer pleasure became tethered to citizen obedience and coercive regulation (20). The regime sanctioned and expounded a version of the “good life,” that made national sovereignty and multi-sectarian accommodation synonymous with modernity, and its own power, over “good governance” (27). One of the central themes of this section is suspension of political judgement wherein people simultaneously acknowledge and dismiss realities of oppression; a condition that French scholar Octave Manzoni has described as ideological disavowal — “I know very well, yet nevertheless…” (40-1). That is, despite being aware of the limits of their market-oriented social freedoms, people could not imagine alternatives to the regime’s secular vision of prosperity and security (39).

The second chapter discusses a range of Syrian television comedies and the way humor brings forth the absurdity of putting together the money-making values of neoliberalism and autocracy’s coercive control (74). Pre-uprising Syrian television was avowedly national, and put the responsibility of fear, corporal excess and corruption on both the ruler and the ruled (61). However, dark humor parodies that emerged later, like the puppet show *Top Goon: Diaries of a Little Dictator* outrightly called for the regime’s ouster. The latter could not sustain long-term popularity, and Wedeen ascribes its diminished punch to revolutionary rigidity and pedantry, which are at odds with the intrinsic quality of comedy “to hold
together a variety of manifestly clashing or ambitious affects” (67). Comedies in their irreverence struggle to put forward any “uniform offering of a redemptive politics,” but can indeed provide “testing grounds for broader collaborative disruptions” or even “a mode of detachment” from daily forms of commercialized living (75).

The third chapter gives an account of influx of information or “fake news,” and how it induces people towards generalized uncertainty and avoiding commitment to political judgement entirely (79-80). No evidence becomes credible enough for loyalists, and more or better information fails to allay the ambivalence of those in the “grey area” (82). The regime thus dampens political excitement by deliberately over-saturating citizens with sensationalist information that raised doubts about the veracity of oppositional narratives. Boundaries of belief and disbelief are blurred as people begin to inhabit a space of reticence where they know things, yet do not know them at the same time. In such a situation, “citizen journalists bore the onus of offering a discursive corrective to autocratic dissembling,” knowing well that too much criticism would instill the same confusion they wished to assuage (84). A key example Wedeen explores is that of the Syrian collective, Abounaddara, and its “emergency cinema” that expanded the scope of political judgment by allowing “ambiguity, contingency, and competing views to thrive” instead of sending out an information overload (82). As Wedeen argues, a cacophony of facts and images would only turn people into “siloed publics,” deriving pleasure in “encountering views that confirm their own” (79).

Chapter four explores state-sponsored melodramatic television shows that enacted a “national community” which was avowedly multi-sectarian but brooked no scope for political difference or dissent (112-3). These films licensed spectators to submit to intense sentimentality but only within a “decidedly militarised national fantasy of sacrifice and order” streamlining the “ambiguities of collective experience” (118). Wedeen contrasts the regime’s morally didactic cinema with the works of Syrian artists like Khalid ‘Abd al-Wahid, Ziad Kalthum, Ossama Mohammed, that acted as “training spaces for political otherwiseness [sic]” without denying ambivalence among viewers (139). Wedeen builds on Arendt to chart the way Kalthum and Mohammed’s films raise possibilities for “representative thinking,” in which an “enlarged mentality is open to radical differences” (138). The final section of the book studies anticipatory fears and rumors of impending massacres by “Sunni goons” in the early years of the Syrian Uprising. The regime managed to displace fears of its own brutality onto a fantasy Other, such as external intervention by the West, sectarian violence by the Sunni majority or even radical Islamist insurgencies stemming from the Gulf (153, 160). The intention is not to say fear made minorities unanimously celebrate the regime, but rather examine how even imaginary threats of victimization prevented them from forging solidarities in the face of “shared complicity” (161-2).

Authoritarian Apprehension steers readers towards a better understanding of ideology and its ability to “specify the terms of collective membership and the standards for judgement” (6). It skillfully uses political ethnography to place cultural consumption, artistic practices, and ordinary bodily habitus of Syrians of varying political affiliations, at the core of its theorizations. Particularly noteworthy is Wedeen’s examination of the ambivalence and disavowal nurtured by Bashar al-Assad’s neoliberal autocracy, demonstrating how discourses of marketization, cosmopolitan living and multicultural secularism, sustained belief in the regime even among those who were witness to its brutalities. The text will prove beneficial for students of culture studies, political science, anthropology, and even activists living in autocracies, trying to make their appeals more persuasive and compelling for people who are toggling between attachments to seductions of order and desires for political reform.

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