

Twentieth Anniversary of Lisa Wedeen's *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*

Introduction to the Symposium on the Twentieth Anniversary of Lisa Wedeen's *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*

Jillian Schwedler, *City University of New York, USA*

In *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, published more than 20 years ago (Wedeen 1999), Lisa Wedeen asks: Why did the Syrian regime spend so much time and so many resources promoting a cult-of-personality campaign for President Hafez al-Asad when ample evidence existed that many citizens neither loved the president nor believed other Syrians' public expressions of love and adoration? Why invest scarce resources in a cult that Syrians clearly did not believe? These straightforward questions and their answers are unpacked in 160 beautifully written pages, including 10 pages of published and unpublished cartoons. Wedeen's answer is what she calls a "politics of *as if*": it mattered little what Syrians really *believed* because as long as they acted *as if* they revered the president and reproduced the images and symbolism of the cult, their public compliance with the cult would work to shore up the regime's power—even when people viewed the cult as patently "bogus." Based on several years of

ethnographic research and semiotic analysis—undertaken under extraordinarily difficult field conditions—Wedeen examines the stories, jokes, cartoons, television shows, and other images that circulated publicly and allowed citizens to quietly signal their disbelief in the cult while publicly complying with the regime's demand that they act as if they believed the cult's ridiculous claims. One of the book's lasting contributions is the "politics of *as if*" as a political category—a contribution with theoretical purchase beyond an analysis of the Asad regime in Syria.

Wedeen's analysis of how acting "as if" worked to produce political power provided a refreshing and compelling counterpoint to arguments about authoritarianism in the Middle East that emphasized the capacity for coercion, intimidation, and physical repression. Most analyses ignored the cult or else took at face value expressions elicited by the cult: Syrians (like North Koreans and others) really love their strongman leader. The shadow of Orientalist assumptions about Middle Eastern societies as backward provided fertile soil for leaving unquestioned the apparent devotion of the masses to monstrous and violent regimes. Whereas less-Orientalist analyses also often dismissed "culture" as epiphenomenal, Wedeen set about understanding how the cult actually worked. Indeed, *Ambiguities* reshaped how we think more broadly about popular support for authoritarian regimes by rejecting "false-consciousness" arguments and unpacking distinctions among consent, compliance, and resistance—distinctions that Wedeen (2019) continues to explore in her most recent book, *Authoritarian Apprehensions*.

This symposium reflects on the continued impact of *Ambiguities* on both the study of Middle East politics and related themes in the discipline. The contributors critically examine the work in the context of the scholarship produced since the first edition was published in 1999, including authoritarianism, state repression, public opinion, the politics of obedience, political violence, and political performance. *Ambiguities* also critiques the way much of political science has embraced Weberian notions of the state and the idea that legitimacy sustains the rule of those who wield power. The symposium contributors reflect the diversity of the field in terms of epistemological commitments and methodologies as well demographics and career stage.

CONTEXT

Ambiguities was published when the field of Middle East politics was undergoing a seismic change. In the 1990s, many top political science departments lacked faculty with expertise in the Middle East. A significant proportion of those who did specialize in the region were area specialists who did not engage directly in the discipline's main theoretical debates

one (white male) senior colleague asked me if I had ever traveled to the region. Although I said that I spoke Arabic and already had completed more than two years of fieldwork in Jordan and Yemen, he remained skeptical that people in the region would talk to me. Many such "commonsense" assumptions about the region were behind the widespread dismissal of Middle East politics as so exceptional as to be useless for comparison—if

One of the book's lasting contributions is the "politics of as if" as a political category—a contribution with theoretical purchase beyond an analysis of the Asad regime in Syria.

or evolving methods. Middle East political scientists were their own cohort apart from even many other area specialists (e.g., Latin Americanists and Africanists) with whom they might have collaborated in cross-regional research. (Exceptions exist, of course, but they were largely outliers in political science or else based in other disciplines.) At the annual conference of the American Political Science Association, for example, political scientists who studied the region congregated in the Conference Group on the Middle East panels. The Conference Group was run (undemocratically) for decades by Lou Cantori and Augustus Richard Norton, who chose the themes for and the composition of the panels each year. Particularly in the 1990s, the Conference Group functioned as a type of "mini-MESA"—the acronym of the interdisciplinary Middle East Studies Association of North America—with panels packed predominantly by Middle East specialists. It was not that Middle East political scientists were producing purely descriptive or atheoretical analyses (although some were) but rather that many were not engaging with the mainstream debates of the field—or even interacting with their counterparts at conferences. Some Middle East specialists began to blame this cohort for failing to engage disciplinary debates or even submit articles to the discipline's primary comparative journals, such as *Comparative Politics* and *World Politics* and the flagship *American Political Science Review* (e.g., Green 1997; Lustick 2000).

To be sure, earlier generations of Middle East political scientists were not solely to blame for this estrangement from

field research were even possible. In her chapter titled "Scientific Knowledge, Liberalism, and Empire: American Political Science in the Modern Middle East," Wedeen (2016) presents a careful analysis of the tensions between political science's liberal and democratic commitments and how those commitments shaped research agendas (as others also have written) in ways that further sidelined scholars of the region.

During this same period, however, a growing cohort of new scholars completed their doctoral degrees at a wide range of institutions, many without a Middle East specialist on their committee. These scholars were committed to directly engaging debates in the discipline and to finding, supporting, and collaborating with one another. Wedeen was of this generation.

RECEPTION

During this subfield turn in the late 1990s, *Ambiguities* was one of a few theoretical powerhouse studies that leveraged intimate knowledge of the region to engage and advance debates central to the political science discipline. Wedeen not only took on coercion-centric approaches to authoritarianism, she also raised fundamental concerns about the way that the discipline studied political behavior and relied on terms such as "legitimacy"—a concept that was ill defined and also fundamentally unmeasurable in a discipline increasingly obsessed with measurement. The influence of *Ambiguities* grew steadily during the next two decades after its publication. According to the University of Chicago Press, *Ambiguities* sold more than 10,000 copies—including a second

Many nonregional specialists continued to hold Orientalist views of the Middle East, seeing it as a monolith whose institutions, practices, and culture were so distinct from those of other regions as to make comparison futile.

the broader discipline. Many nonregional specialists continued to hold Orientalist views of the Middle East, seeing it as a monolith whose institutions, practices, and culture were so distinct from those of other regions as to make comparison futile. Whereas the Middle East's historic past was romantic and exotic, the contemporary period was perceived as hostile, backward, and dangerous. Indeed, after describing my dissertation research on Islamist political parties in the late 1990s,

edition, with a new preface, in 2015. Virtually every political scientist specializing in the Middle East has read it, regardless of the reader's epistemological or methodological orientation.

However, the influence of *Ambiguities* extends far beyond Middle East political science, as reflected in the contributions to this symposium. The book's influence also is evidenced by the appearance of Wedeen's work on numerous

reading lists for doctoral comprehensive exams in comparative politics. In all three of her books—including *Peripheral Visions: Publics, Power, and Performance in Yemen* (Wedeen 2008)—Wedeen engages the main debates in the discipline: power, authoritarianism, consent, and democracy and

merely celebratory. Their authors ask difficult questions, showing that the enduring value of *Ambiguities* is not only that it has had an impact on major theoretical debates but also that it continues to inspire and suggest exciting avenues for theoretical and empirical work. Wedeen also shows how

Ambiguities models a fearlessness and confidence in taking on the major debates and—by name—some of titans of the discipline.

democratic practice, among others. In her *American Political Science Review* article (Wedeen 2002), she examines the discipline's various (and incommensurate) conceptualizations of culture while also engaging scholars of rational choice to suggest how they might better examine aspects of culture in their own studies.

Wedeen's work thus has been inspirational not only for her theoretical interventions and careful empirical analyses but also because she has led the way for the next generations of scholars by engaging the mainstream of the discipline from two peripheries: area studies and interpretive analyses. *Ambiguities* models a fearlessness and confidence in taking on the major debates and—by name—some of titans of the discipline. However, it also models the need for respect for divergent methodologies and epistemologies; carefulness in getting others' arguments right; and a spirit of lively engagement for the betterment of the discipline, its methodological tools, and its analytic contributions.


The contributions to this symposium demonstrate the broad impact of Wedeen's scholarship, including her work subsequent to *Ambiguities*. However, the contributions are not


seemingly insurmountable epistemological and methodological divides can indeed be crossed—and with rich theoretical and empirical results. ■


REFERENCES


- Green, Jerrold. 1997. "The Politics of Middle East Politics." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 27 (3): 517–18.
- Lustick, Ian S. 2000. "The Quality of Theory and the Comparative Disadvantage of Area Studies." *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 34:189–92.
- Wedeen, Lisa. 1999. *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wedeen, Lisa. 2002. "Conceptualizing Culture: Possibilities for Political Science." *American Political Science Review* 96 (4): 713–28.
- Wedeen, Lisa. 2008. *Peripheral Visions: Publics, Power, and Performance in Yemen*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wedeen, Lisa. 2016. "Scientific Knowledge, Liberalism, and Empire: American Political Science in the Modern Middle East." In *Middle East Studies for the New Millennium: Infrastructures of Knowledge*, ed. Seteney Shami and Cynthia Miller-Idriss. New York: New York University Press and the Social Science Research Council.
- Wedeen, Lisa. 2019. *Authoritarian Apprehensions: Ideology, Judgment, and Mourning in Syria*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

SYMPOSIUM CONTRIBUTORS


Christian Davenport  is Walgreen Professor of Human Understanding at the University of Michigan and research professor at the Peace Research Institute Oslo. For more information, see www.christiandavenport.com. He can be reached at christiandavenport@mac.com.


Amaney A. Jamal  is dean of the School of Public Policy and International Affairs and Edwards S. Sanford Professor of Politics at Princeton University. Jamal directs the Workshop on Arab Political Development and the Bobst–American University of Beirut Collaboration. She can be reached at ajamal@princeton.edu.


Adria K. Lawrence  is the Aronson Associate Professor of Political Science and International Studies at Johns Hopkins University. Her research examines violent and nonviolent conflict in colonial and authoritarian regimes. She can be reached at adria.lawrence@jhu.edu.

Robyn Marasco  is professor of political science at Hunter College and The Graduate Center, City University of New York. She is the author of *The Highway of Despair: Critical Theory after Hegel* (Columbia University Press, 2015), which reconstructs the emancipatory project of critical theory around the idea of negative dialectics, as well as several articles on critical theory and politics. She can be reached at rmarasco@hunter.cuny.edu.

Jillian Schwedler  is professor of political science at Hunter College and The Graduate Center at the City University of New York, and she is cofounder and codirector of the Sidi Bou Said School of Critical Protest Studies. As a specialist in Middle East politics, her research interests include contentious politics, protests, policing, and the politics of space and geography. Her most recent book, *Protesting Jordan: Geographies of Power and Dissent*, will be published by Stanford University Press in 2022. She can be reached at jschwedler@gc.cuny.edu.

James C. Scott  is emeritus professor of political science and anthropology at Yale University. His most recent book is *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest Agrarian States* (Yale University Press, 2017). He can be reached at james.scott@yale.edu.

Lisa Wedeen  is Mary R. Morton Professor of Political Science and the College at the University of Chicago. She also is codirector of the Chicago Center for Contemporary Theory. Her research interests include political and social theory, comparative politics, Middle East studies, and interpretive methods. She can be reached at lwedeen@uchicago.edu.

Elisabeth Jean Wood  is Crosby Professor of the Human Environment and professor of political science and international and area studies at Yale University. Her current work focuses on political violence, particularly conflict-related sexual violence during civil war, and its legacies. She can be reached at elisabeth.wood@yale.edu.