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Acting As If: Dramatics, Deception, and the Production of State Power

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In *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, Lisa Wedeen (1999) provocatively argued that the cult of Hafez al-Asad worked not *in spite of* the fact that the cult's symbols and rhetoric were patently absurd but *because* they were. Even ridiculous displays of power and nonsensical rhetorical statements can generate compliance with a regime. After more than 20 years, how well has this argument stood up? Have persuasive counterarguments undermined the central claims in *Ambiguities of Domination*? In the two decades since its publication, I have participated in intense discussions of this book as both a graduate student at the University of Chicago and as a professor. The leading critical response that readers make is that it is coercion, not symbolic displays, that explains compliance. This article revisits Wedeen's claim that symbols and rhetoric matter—and not solely as signals of a regime's coercive capacity. I question the literature's inattention to the efforts of authoritarian regimes to dominate the symbolic world. I suggest that the literature has yet to fully recognize the potency of the arguments in *Ambiguities of Domination*, which continue to challenge common perceptions about why people comply with deeply unpopular regimes. Further, *Ambiguities of Domination* not only helps us make sense of an authoritarian regime in the Middle East but also contributes to our understanding of contemporary experiences of state power.

As Wedeen (1999, 144) discusses in the conclusion to *Ambiguities*, social scientists typically focus on three sources of compliance: voluntary compliance due to perceptions of regime legitimacy; utilitarian compliance that occurs when an individual or group benefits from complying; and coercive compliance from the use or threat of punishment.[1] Without denying that any of these mechanisms can produce compliance, Wedeen draws attention to "disciplinary-symbolic power," an alternative form of coercive control that is largely unrecognized by social scientists working on states and regimes.

But is disciplinary-symbolic power a distinct "subsystem of coercive compliance," as Wedeen (1999, 144) states? In class discussions, some students invariably insist that the cult operates according to a straightforward logic of coercion: that is, people comply with the requirements of the cult because they fear punishment if they deviate. The cult, they argue, operates as nothing more than a threat to both participants and viewers. *Contra* Wedeen, they are adamant that disciplinary-symbolic power is epiphenomenal.

Assessing this counterargument requires a closer look at Wedeen's theory of exactly how the cult works. Drawing from Foucault (1995), Wedeen (1999, 6) argues that the cult operates to discipline, not punish, Syrians: "Asad's cult operates as a disciplinary device, generating a politics of public dissimulation in which citizens act *as if* they revere their leader."

How do public displays of forced dissimulation affect Syrians? Wedeen (1999, 6, 19, 145) describes multiple effects. First, the cult "produces guidelines for acceptable speech and behavior." Second, it "occasions the enforcement of obedience." When the regime packs students onto a bus and takes them to a stadium to hold up placards that form an image of the great leader, the regime has directly regimented the bodies of participants. This is coercion: some Syrians are forced to participate and are threatened with punishment if they do not. Wedeen acknowledges this punitive power; her claim is not that the Syrian regime eschews coercive methods but that the cult's effects go beyond threatening people with punishment for noncompliance. The third mechanism of the cult thereby arises from the distinction that she makes between a threat to punish and a *display* of power. It is the theater of the cult that is effective—and not only to participants but also to a wider audience. Displays of power are different than political disappearances or individual arrests because they are public performances that "dramatize the state's power" (Wedeen 1999, 19).

In other situations, a display can constitute a threat of future harm, as when insurgents or state forces in a civil war target a village using highly visible collective violence to send a message to other villages about the cost of disobedience. However, the cult that Wedeen describes is not performing punishment. These events are not public floggings or executions, which we might expect if the intent was to demonstrate coercive capacity. The regime is putting obedience, not punishment, on display. Observers who are not directly threatened with sanctions for nonparticipation see their fellow citizens enacting insincere expressions of loyalty. These performances serve as a reminder of the regime's power and their own relative powerlessness. Insincerity is essential; if participants were true believers, they would be demonstrating loyalty, not obedience, which implies an action that is not freely chosen. Spectacles and performances signal widespread compliance despite disbelief. They show "that the regime can make most people obey most of the time" (Wedeen 1999, 146). They do not show that the regime can punish people who transgress most of the time.

A fourth explanation of what the cult does is that it works like advertising. One of its most striking characteristics is that it compels people "to say the ridiculous and avow the absurd" (Wedeen 1999, 12). It is easy to be persuaded of Wedeen's (1999, 1) claim that the cult does not produce legitimacy when many of the performances she describes are so outrageous that

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they seem unbelievable: crowds hold up a heart symbol to indicate the depth of their feelings for Asad; soldiers dream of Asad; he is the "premier pharmacist"; and he "knows all things about all issues." The cult, Wedeen (1999, 19) suggests—like advertising—is effective even if its claims are not taken literally. An advertisement need not be literally true to generate a positive association with a particular product in a consumer's mind. Consider Burger King's mid-1970s campaign that promised "Have It Your Way!" This slogan was meant to suggest the fast-food chain's willingness to tailor orders to individual tastes when, in fact, what Burger King is known for is not differentiation but rather uniformity. The beauty of Burger King (and its competitors) is that you can go to one in Baltimore, Moscow, or Cairo and eat the *exact same burger.* You can remove the pickle or add ketchup but, in truth, Burger King offers standardization, not a product made to personal tastes. The slogan ludicrously promises the opposite of what Burger King actually offers. A more accurate tagline would be "Have It the Same Way!" Nevertheless, more than 30 years later—and although it seems neither accurate nor memorable—I still associate Burger King with that slogan. It invokes getting what you want whether or not you believe the literal claim. Another example is Anheuser-Busch's claim that what differentiates Bud Light from its competitors is "drinkability." It is obvious that the beer's ability to be swallowed and consumed as a beverage does not set it apart from other beers. The statement is essentially meaningless yet still able to occupy the minds of those who see the ad. The psychology behind why advertising works is its own area of study, but it clearly does not (always) work because it generates associations to products that consumers take literally.

Have persuasive counterarguments undermined the central claims in Ambiguities of Domination*?*

More than 20 years later, Wedeen's argument that false statements can be politically effective not in spite of being false but at least in part because they are seems ominously prescient, even outside of the authoritarian setting that she describes. Populist leaders in established democracies regularly issue false or exaggerated statements to bolster support. Donald Trump claimed, for instance, to "know more about renewables than any human being on Earth"; to know more about taxes than anyone "in the history of the world"; and that "there is nobody who understands the horror of nuclear war" better than him (Blake 2016). He has a "natural ability" as a medical expert (*BBC News* 2020). Although fact checkers and media analysts debunked his false claims, his opponents felt as though Trump often "got away with it" not because his lies went unchallenged but because his false claims served to advertise his power, confirm his ability to say whatever he wanted, and undermine the very idea of truth itself. Some of Trump's followers may believe that his statements were true, but others did not take him literally. For them, it was not the truth of his statements that mattered but instead the maddening effect of those false statements on their political opponents—the scientists, scholars, and urban elite who claimed superior and accurate knowledge yet who seemed disconnected from and disparaging of their needs.

Wedeen's fifth claim is that the cult turns participants into regime accomplices. "Obedience makes people complicit; it entangles them in self-enforcing relations of domination, thereby making it hard for participants to see themselves simply as victims of the state's caprices" (1999, 83–84). Although she acknowledges that participants can later hold a regime accountable, complicity makes it more difficult to claim victimhood (1999, 79). But does participation make it psychologically difficult for people to feel like victims? This ultimately is an empirical question, but it is at least plausible that complicity is easier for people to justify than Wedeen maintains. Once a regime collapses, it is not uncommon to see prior regime supporters claiming that their actions were driven by fear or that they had no choice but to participate—even when they clearly made a choice. Resolving participation with victimhood may not be much of a cognitive burden in the wake of regime change.

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Alternatively, it is possible that the difficulty varies across different types of participants. A soldier who publicly delivered panegyrics praising the regime may experience more discomfort with claiming victimhood later on than a shopkeeper who displayed the ruler's portrait or a student who showed up at a rally. Rereading Wedeen's discussion in 2021 brought to mind the "Saturday Night Live" spoof of an advertisement for a new perfume inspired by Ivanka Trump: "Complicit." The spoof aired in March 2017, early in the Trump administration, and poked fun at those who had hoped Ivanka would exert a moderating effect on her father. Instead, the spoof suggested, she was complicit in her father's actions: "the woman who could stop all of this…but won't." It is far easier to suppose that a family member or close adviser of a leader, like Ivanka Trump, will have trouble distancing herself than a person who lacks access to the leadership. Most of the

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cult participants that Wedeen describes are ordinary people with little influence on the Asad regime; their sense of complicity may be fleeting and may not constrain future resistance.

Yet, even if people do not quite feel like accomplices, the suggestion that dissimulating may produce negative psychological consequences remains an intriguing empirical proposition. Does forcing someone to admit that two plus two equals five undermine his sense of self?[2] Is the act of dissimulating costly to the individual? Most of us must dissimulate on a regular basis: we offer false compliments to children, partners, and supervisors; we chuckle at jokes that are not funny; we tell colleagues we think they have made an important point when in fact we find it banal. Our everyday experiences suggest that we are accustomed to dissimulating, but it also is something that many—likely most—of us find unpleasant. We are aware when we tell white lies because it is expedient to do so or when we fail to speak the truth. It can be tiresome and draining. It is reasonable to suppose that the more a person is required to dissimulate, the more burdensome and stressful it becomes.

This discussion leads to a sixth mechanism from the book. Wedeen argues that the cult's psychological effects extend beyond those who are called on to actively dissimulate, wearying the general public. The cult "clutters public space with monotonous slogans and empty gestures, which tire the minds and bodies of producers and consumers alike" (Wedeen 1999, 6). When I was in graduate school, I confess that I found this mechanism to be the least persuasive. Could we be sure that the cult produced fatigue rather than anger? Can public space really be "cluttered" in a way that diminishes critical opposition? I was more convinced that the cult operated as a signaling device, demonstrating the regime's ability to enforce obedience.

Yet, from my current vantage point, I understand better what Wedeen meant. Trump's self-congratulatory tweets, his claims to have managed the coronavirus pandemic in the best possible way even as the US death toll reached hundreds of thousands, and his attempts to overturn the election were exhausting for his opponents to observe. A political arena cluttered by lies and self-congratulatory claims is draining. It fuels the self-care industrial complex that markets wellness products and miracle foods to segments of the population that seek to escape the news not only because it is gloomy but also because it is filled with falsehoods and hypocrisies that are themselves exhausting.

This weariness appears to have been a shared experience for many on the left, as the following example suggests. When White House adviser Dr. Anthony Fauci covered his face with his hand as Trump was making a comment about the deep state during a March 2020 press briefing, the clip went viral. People posted the "facepalm" moment on social media because it suggested that even a person who worked closely with Trump was repulsed by and tired of his lies. "Fauci is all of us," one tweet stated. Dr. Fauci quickly explained that he was merely dislodging a lozenge—a clarification that illustrates the pressure on regime allies to demonstrate loyalty.

I do not want to overstate the resemblance between Syria under Hafez al-Asad and the United States under Donald Trump. These are not analogous regimes.[3] My purpose is narrower: to suggest that the psychological mechanism Wedeen describes is a plausible description of the emotional costs incurred when those in power create a false, shallow political environment.

What people do with their exhaustion remains an unanswered question. Wedeen (1999, 6, 157) suggests that this cluttering of public space with the cult's symbols and rhetoric "kills politics"—it is depoliticizing and isolates Syrians from one another. Yet, exhaustion and apathy are not the same. Acts of public dissimulation, exaggerated praise, and obsequious iconography can "tire minds and bodies" without killing politics. In the United States, weariness did not foreclose political action. Opponents of Trump were sick and tired of his rhetoric. They sometimes refused to watch his rallies or the presidential debates. They put on yoga pants and meditated to relieve stress. These coping strategies did not stop people from engaging in political work such as volunteering to get out the vote, donating to political campaigns, joining rallies, or driving to the nation's capital to pay their respects to an admired US Supreme Court justice.

In Syria during the period that *Ambiguities* covers, opportunities for political action were far more restricted than they are in the United States. Yet, Wedeen also noted the potential for resistance even in 1999, writing that "the production of apathy and cynicism…while powerful, is never absolute" (1999, 149). She emphasized that whereas shared disbelief produces compliance through the mechanisms discussed previously, it also creates a basis for future resistance. People know that others do not believe, and when they share a forbidden political joke with friends or watch a television show that satirizes official discourse, they counteract the atomizing effects of the cult (Wedeen 1999, 90). The cult's discourse provides guidelines not only for what is appropriate and acceptable but also for what is subversive (Wedeen 1999, 131). During the Hafez al-Asad era, the lack of outlets for political action—not apathy—may have prevented active resistance.

The updated 2015 preface to *Ambiguities* and Wedeen's (2019) *Authoritarian Apprehensions: Ideology, Judgment, and Mourning in Syria* discuss the breakdown of order and the onset of resistance that occurred years later in Syria when uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt had made political action more propitious. By this time, Hafez al-Asad had died and the cult was gone. However, even if the cult had been in place, there is no reason to suppose that an uprising could not have occurred.

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Wedeen does not claim that disciplinary-symbolic power stifles resistance indefinitely. There are no infallible autocratic tools, as scholars who focus on coercion, material incentives, and other mechanisms of autocratic control would readily acknowledge.

In reviewing Wedeen's theory of how the cult operates, my aim is to consider both the importance of disciplinary-symbolic power and whether it is distinct from coercive power. Coercion has a part to play but it is a smaller one than my students and the larger literature on regime stability have attributed to it. The mechanisms in *Ambiguities* differ from the logic of coercive control that is so simple to understand and so pervasive in writings on authoritarian strongmen. Disciplinary-symbolic power cannot be reduced to the use of or the threat to use force. More than two decades after the book's publication, there has not been a persuasive counterargument that has undermined this claim.

Disciplinary-symbolic power has not yet made its way into the mainstream literatures on authoritarianism, conflict, and social movements. These literatures continue to focus on how repression, legitimacy, and material incentives structure resistance and compliance. But regimes outside of the Middle East—even those that lack a cult of personality—regularly attempt to dominate the symbolic world. We are living in an era in which debates about the importance of truth and knowledge are particularly vibrant. We have pressing questions about the political effects of cluttering public forums with lies and exaggerations. The theoretical contributions of *Ambiguities of Domination* remain more salient than ever, offering a framework that surpasses cost–benefit analyses that fail to address why leaders and publics devote time and effort in attempting to control or subvert political symbols and rhetoric. ■

NOTES

1. For examples that consider these explanations for regime stability, see Bellin (2004), Blaydes (2018), Escribà-Folch (2013), Svolik (2012), and Wintrobe (1998).
2. See Wedeen's discussion of Richard Rorty (1999, 79).
3. Snyder's statement (in Kanefield 2020) that leaders such as Putin and Trump rule by creating constant spectacle suggests that Wedeen's insights extend beyond their original context.

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