Implications of Wedeen's *Ambiguities of Domination* for the Analysis of Political Violence

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Lisa Wedeen's *Ambiguities of Domination* (1999) continues to teach us about the exercise of power. In her analysis of Hafiz al-Asad's regime, Wedeen asks why a regime would expend resources on a cult of personality based on absurd claims rather than invest in only coercion and economic incentives. The answer, she suggests, lies in how the public's participation in regime rituals helped constitute the regime's political power, demonstrating mass conformity despite mass disbelief.

The book's core contribution is the concept of "disciplinary symbolic power." Symbols, discourse, and rhetoric produced political power in the ethically, culturally, and politically fragmented Syrian polity even in the absence of belief or emotional commitment. Participation in the regime's symbolic universe—acting *as if* participation were grounded in sincere engagement and authentic belief—constrained and channeled discourse, behavior, and thought. Wedeen suggests that this form of social control is particularly important in postcolonial settings in which nationalism preceded state building. To be sure, coercion is always in the background, she acknowledges, but the construction of this complementary form of power is important in how such authoritarian regimes maintain social control.

Resistance to the regime also turned on symbols, rhetoric, and discourse. Disbelief was not a "hidden transcript" (Scott 1990) but rather was shared through stories, film, plays, and widespread jokes that played on the gap between public performance and private disbelief. These were sites of politics as they unsettled the representation of domination. However, the regime benefited from interactions that indirectly but clearly parodied it because their enjoyment exacted complicity in the regime's discourse (i.e., the production of cynicism as a form of social control).

This article discusses what recent literature on political violence might gain from deeper engagement with Wedeen's analysis of disciplinary symbolic power in Syria. I focus on the role of ideology, degrees of socialization, horizontal resistance to disciplinary symbolic power, the constitution of power through participation in spectacle, and the legacies of complicity.

The role of ideology in prescribing and proscribing certain forms of violence against specific social groups is a resurgent theme in the literature on political violence. As scholars increasingly document differences in patterns of violence across armed organizations in their repertoire of violence, targeting of social groups, and its frequency, many have turned to differences in ideologies and institutions to account for those differences. Concurrently, scholars of genocide emphasize the role of ideology in whether mass killing across ethnic lines escalates to genocide (Straus 2012; 2015).

To varying degrees, an organization's ideology may mandate, order, or authorize certain subpatterns of violence—that is, specific forms against particular social groups—and the conditions under which they are legitimate. By *ideology*, I mean "a *more or less systematic* set of ideas that includes the identification of a referent group (a class, ethnic or other social group, a nation), an enunciation of the grievances or challenges that the group confronts, the identification of objectives on behalf of that group (political change—or defense against its threat), and a (perhaps vaguely defined) program of action" (Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood 2014, 215; italics added). The Islamic State, for example, drew on its Salafi-jihadist ideology to justify the sexual enslavement of Yazidi girls and women and to build institutions for their sale and treatment. It did not enslave Sunni Muslims, which the ideology prohibited (Revkin and Wood 2021).

Wedeen (1999) emphasizes the ideational aspects of political power but shows how an ideology may be so much on the "less" side of "more or less" as to be not only inconsistent—Asad was both a "knight of war" and a "man of peace"—but also incoherent and even plainly absurd—Asad as the premier scholar, teacher, and pharmacist. While regime ideology included a broad consensus around three beliefs concerning threats to the nation—the regime defends Syria from Israel, the Golan Heights must be returned, and the regime provides unprecedented political stability—its content was both flexible and vague, drawing on rhetoric and symbols of the patriarchal family with its norms of obedience and authority.

Scholars of political violence can learn from Wedeen's analysis of how ideology matters even when it is vague and inconsistent. We often study the "work" of ideology in organizations on the "more" side of "more or less," neglecting to analyze whether and how weak ideologies motivate, mobilize, and structure organizations and social groups.

Another recent theme in the literature on political violence is the role of both formal and informal (or horizontal) socialization in the production of violence—and restraint in its exercise. To varying degrees, an organization's ideology prescribes institutions for producing, controlling, and regulating violence. Yet, combatants may engage in violence that is neither ordered nor authorized. The extent to which an armed organization addresses the principal–agent challenges in

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wielding its preferred pattern of violence depends on its institutions. Institutions of discipline and of socialization, for example, range from the enforcement of minimal rules of obedience to commanders to the internalization of the organization's norms and rules concerning violence (Manekin 2013; Weinstein 2007; Wood 2018). Organizations that endorse restraint in violence—meaning narrow repertoires and targeting—are able to engage in sustained restraint only if they continually inculcate relevant rules and norms, including their grounding in the organization's ideology (Hoover Green 2017; 2018).

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Armed organizations thus vary in the extent to which they instill rules, norms, and beliefs, from mere compliance with commander's orders to the deep inculcation of norms and ideology. In their classic *Crimes of Obedience*, Kelman and Hamilton (1989) made a further distinction, adding role identification. Role identification differs from compliance: socialization is sufficiently deep that the person knows how to "play" the role rather than simply, literally, and rotely following commands. Moreover, it differs from internalization in that the norms, rules, and values are merely enacted in the situation rather than sincerely held.

Wedeen's (1999) analysis of the al-Asad regime shows how role playing in the form of participation in official rituals and expected routines constituted power: to convene, to force cooperation in absurd rituals and bizarre affirmations, and to participate in the public performance of complicity with the regime. In short, the regime's showcasing the enactment of official preferences as public spectacle, despite their discrepancy with private preferences, was a form of social control, of disciplinary symbolic power. As she notes, this is distinct from the usual approach to private preferences, which presumes that the discrepancy is not common knowledge. Rather, "everyone knows" that al-Asad was not the world's premier pharmacist.

This suggests that more attention should be given in the political violence literature to socialization at the level of role playing. For example, the coordinated movement of soldiers in conventional war can be interpreted as way to constitute (and project) military power—although privately, each soldier may prefer to be far from combat. In irregular wars, the dispersing of insurgent combatants in covert operations renders mere compliance insufficient because behavior is not readily observed and punishment not easily inflicted. Commanders, even field commanders, may not be able to distinguish whether their combatants engage in skillful role playing or act on internalized norms. For similar reasons, counterinsurgent forces socialize combatants to at least the role-playing level so that they can carry out missions under the decentralization of combat in remote terrain. Whether they are more effective counterinsurgents if socialization is deepened to internalization is a question that appears to be not well addressed: research on training may not distinguish between that which generates role playing and that which inculcates (Bell and Terry 2021).

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It is important, however, to note that socialization of combatants also is driven by horizontal interactions among peers, not only from above. Initial isolation of recruits and their mistreatment by officers (including collective punishment) forge the bonds that link the "band of brothers" such that soldiers stay on the battlefield to protect one another rather than flee. Soldiers themselves strengthen those bonds (i.e., horizontal social cohesion), together resisting abuse by belittling abusive officers and mocking the bureaucratic stupidity of the military, for example. Militaries often tolerate horizontal abuse such as hazing—although it is formally prohibited—because it is viewed as a time-tested means of further strengthening those bonds.

Wedeen (1999) explores something like horizontal socialization in her analysis of films, plays, and other art that parodied the regime, as long as it was indirect. Jokes that played on the gap between public performance and private disbelief were widespread. She suggests that enjoyment of such content comprised a form of resistance to the regime but also exacted complicity in the regime's discourse, which benefited the regime (and may explain why it was tolerated). A person must participate in the symbols and rhetoric to subvert them, with the result that discourse, behavior, and thought are constrained and channeled—a form of socialization through participation despite its lived experience as resistance.

This suggests that there may be a horizontal dimension of disciplinary symbolic power in the socialization of combatants. Combatant social practices such as hazing and mocking officers are prohibited and therefore participation might be deemed at least nominally subversive of the organization.

Nonetheless, participation may exact a similar cost in complicity with the organization's discourse, symbols, and rituals, even though it may be experienced—and may be—a form of resistance.

Does disciplinary symbolic power do similar work in the case of socialization through participation in practices that are in strong, explicit tension with formal, top-down efforts at socialization? Consider the pattern of sexual assault within the ranks of the US military, a practice sustained—because it is so often tolerated by commanders—despite two decades of "zero-tolerance" official policy (Wood and Toppelberg 2017). During those two decades, the military devised training programs to inculcate norms against harassment and assault and sought to improve reporting (while also resisting legislative efforts to take decisions to prosecute outside the chain of command). Not all units have members who engage in sexual assault but, in those that do, it often is both common knowledge and rarely reported. The practice is largely driven by horizontal socialization (although modeling by rogue officers also has a role). Participants; witnesses; and survivors of sexual humiliation, sexual harassment including "jokes," sexual assault (from unwanted touching to physical penetration), and retaliation for reporting proscribed behavior are all socialized to gendered norms of what is *really* prohibited, despite the earnest rhetoric of commanders. The tolerated mocking of the formal training to instill norms against sexual harassment and assault—which depend on fluency in the military's discourse, rhetoric, and symbols, as in the Syrian case—further undermines efforts at top-down socialization.

The example suggests that under some conditions, horizontal resistance to disciplinary symbolic power may be effective, supporting prohibited behavior that is destructive to the overarching organization. This degree of resistance appears significantly more powerful than participation in parody and humor in Syria: it goes well beyond the comic subversion of discourse, rhetoric, and symbols. Of course, the normative polarity is inverted: resistance to the prohibition of sexual assault entrenches rather than subverts unjust power. The comparison raises the question: Under what conditions does resistance to disciplinary symbolic power become effective?

Returning to the theme of participation as constitutive of power, Wedeen's (1999) analysis raises another question: Can participation in rituals and spectacles be constitutive of power in settings other than those convened by the state? In her (tragically, posthumous) book, *Show Time: The Logic and Power of Violent Display*, Lee Ann Fujii (2021) asked why ordinary people sometimes engage in gratuitous, collective, "extra-lethal" violence against their neighbors, including public lynching; the public rape, torture, and humiliation of victims before killing; and the public mutilation of corpses. Fujii analyzed such violence as "violent display": violence that is performed for an audience, often in public spaces. She showed how it asserts a preferred social order through the redrawing (or reconfirming) of social categories to resolve ambiguous boundaries of ethnic and racial difference or to respond to transgressions of those boundaries. Participants collectively stage the violence—making and implementing decisions about lighting, positioning, editing, and costumes—to produce the sequence of actions that comprise the atrocious event.

Participants do not only punish the transgression of social boundaries, Fujii argued. Their participation also constitutes those boundaries and their meaning. In analyzing ethnic and racial difference, she emphasized the variability in meaning of categories and boundaries over time and place. Despite state efforts to fix and define categories, local meanings and practices are varied, malleable, and ambiguous. It is from that ambiguity that violent display draws its power. Precisely because "who is who" is not always obvious, and because some people break the rules, violent display resolves ambiguity by sharpening the salience of boundaries for participants, those victimized, and their communities. Furthermore, in the new political order, those boundaries are not only boundaries of difference but also boundaries of racial and ethnic *hierarchy*—one that may invert that of the old order or introduce a ranking where one was not previously present.

Violent display not only asserts boundaries of the preferred social order; it also transforms participants and onlookers, socializing through participation—even when participation is that of unwilling witnesses. Fujii insisted that it is the experience of hearing, smelling, and seeing violence that transforms those attending: embodied participation is essential to the transformative power of violent display.

The similarities and the contrasts to Wedeen's (1999) analysis of regime-sponsored spectacle and ritual are compelling. Both analyses undermine the convenient distinction between ideational and materialist approaches to power. Participation in the event's rhetoric, discourse, and symbols is constitutive of power in both settings through the assertion of boundaries of community. Both scholars view ambiguity as central to the "work" of ritual and spectacle. Although violence is central to the atrocious events that Fujii analyzed, she focused on its performative—that is, symbolic—aspects. In contrast to regime spectacles, "roles" in violent display are not only theatrical but also are improvised, emerging from the social interaction of participants.

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However, while both analyze participation in ritual and spectacle as complicity, Wedeen views complicity through participation in the regime's symbolic universe, even if through parody, as exacting an enduring psychic cost, one born of the distance between authentic belief and public affirmation. She can trace those lingering effects because she analyzes the sustained reproduction of regime power across decades. In contrast, Fujii's (2021) close analysis of particular events (in Rwanda, Bosnia, and the Eastern Shore of Maryland) allowed her to trace the social dynamics of complicity in the performance of violence as a spectacle but not their legacies.

Scholars working on political violence have much to learn from Wedeen's interpretivist approach to the analysis of power, particularly how participation in rituals and spectacles is constitutive of power even in conditions of mass disbelief and widespread parody. Socialization through role identification, although more limited than internalization, in some settings has strong effects and lingering consequences that as yet are too little explored. ■

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