

Lisa Wedeen: Appreciations and Queries

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Lisa Wedeen's *Ambiguities of Domination* is a *tour de force* precisely because it is such a "heavy lift" intellectually. Here we have a rather disillusioned, even cynical, population; a non-charismatic, even lackadaisical, supreme leader; and command performances of allegiance that convey little if anything in the way of genuine enthusiasm. The key term, on which Wedeen's analysis pivots, is "as if." She demonstrates in great detail and with impressive nuance exactly how as-if displays of loyalty and support work to occupy and shape the public sphere. As she asserts, "Asad is powerful because his regime can compel people to say the ridiculous and avow the absurd" (1999/2015, 12). It does this, she argues, by thereby generating complicity, indicating the limits of permissible public behavior; by establishing public norms, filling the "space" of the public sphere; and by atomizing any potential political public by monopolizing political performance. Part of the power of such mandatory performance art is the knowledge on the part of those who are complicitly "going through the motions" that they are the type of people who will repeatedly defer to such nonsense. Repetition (i.e., habitus) is a nontrivial part of her case. Wedeen is scrupulous in also showing the cracks in this smooth façade, the role of coercion in enforcing the frontiers of dissent, and the genuine appeal of at least a portion of the script (i.e., anti-Zionism, pan-Arab solidarity with the Palestinians, and the return of the Golan Heights).

Because much of the originality of Wedeen's powerful case rests on claims about what I call "the price of performance," I concentrate on this issue for much of this analysis. There would be no questions to raise if, in fact, the performances that Wedeen examines were "good-faith" performances—as perhaps they are in North Korea—but the daring and original case she makes is about the price of "bad-faith" (as the term is used by Jean-Paul Sartre) performances.

Social life depends on countless bad-faith performances that are so ubiquitous that they escape our notice. We smile and nod politely at what friends and acquaintances say when, in truth, we disagree with them. Politeness requires much dissimulation and many bad-faith performances in the service of smooth personal relations. Surely the cost of this type of dissimulation is not experienced as deeply wounding to one's sense of authenticity and dignity. But what about performances that are far more consequential and apparently require more humiliating forms of self-abasement?

NED COBB, AKA NATE SHAW, AND PERFORMANCE ART

I offer an example that was, when I first read it, something of a revelation. It comes from Rosengarten's (1974) revelatory oral

history of Ned Cobb, a Black Alabama sharecropper and activist with the Sharecroppers Union, which covers his life from the turn of the century until the 1970s. As a proud but nearly penniless cotton sharecropper in the 1920s, Ned Cobb needed a loan from a hardware storeowner with whom he often did business. The loan was vital and Ned knew that, given the circumstances of the racial hierarchy in the Jim Crow South, a convincing performance of racial deference would be required. Having dealt with landlords, white storeowners, and cotton-gin supervisors—not to mention a white-dominated racial order as the encompassing environment—he was well prepared for the performance. He had the necessary repertoire in his portfolio of "shuckin' and jivin'." At the hardware store, the performance goes off as he intends, without a hitch, and he gets the loan he desperately needs.

What does the performance "do" and what does it cost Ned Cobb? From the perspective of a wide-angled lens, the bad-faith performance is yet another public demonstration of the deference and self-abasement that further reinforces the public sphere of white supremacy—another ubiquitous, quotidian public lesson about what is required of Blacks in the Jim Crow South. We know enough about Ned Cobb's sense of pride and anger at this point to be certain that his is precisely the type of as-if performance that Wedeen aims to analyze. Sure enough, as Wedeen (1999/2015) explains, the massive accumulation of such as-if performances are the "warp and woof" of what held the tapestry of public racial hierarchy together. They established the authorized, safe script; they defined the boundary of acceptable conduct and speech; and they tended to monopolize the public sphere of daily race relations. Only in this light can we see the revolutionary break that such seemingly simple acts as sitting at a lunch counter or on a bus seat reserved for whites came to represent.

What the performance cost Ned Cobb is more fraught, however. We might assume that having done what was required to get his loan that he would feel diminished or regret having had to shuck and jive once again before the hardware storeowner. To judge from his own account in the oral history, however, this assumption would be greatly mistaken. He returns home in a triumphal mood, not only for having gotten the loan he needed but also for having put on a consummate performance of (bad-faith) deference, for having so mastered (I choose the verb "mastered" deliberately!) the racial code of rural Alabama as to be able to manipulate its nuances to achieve his objective. He has the sense of having "put something over" on the hardware storeowner. In his own eyes, he is the "winner" of the encounter. His sense of triumph is not so different from that of a brilliant adman who, working within

the confines of a given culture and its social assumptions, persuades consumers to buy something they did not know they needed.

I allow that we can never be certain that we have plumbed the depths of what the performance meant to Cobb. If, however, we take seriously—as any ethnographer must—the explanation that any subject offers for his own behavior, then it complicates Wedeen’s analysis. A subject’s self-description of action may not be the whole truth, but it must be the point of departure for further analysis. Cobb’s account is deeply at odds with Wedeen’s description (drawing on Orwell and Rorty’s exegesis of Orwell) suggesting that “knowledge of oneself as someone who will obey has political and psychological consequences” (1999/2015, 79).

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In the captivating case of Syrian soldiers asked to recount their dreams before an authority figure, Wedeen (1999/2015, 81) suggests that the performance alone inculcates passive obedience:

By complying, each soldier demonstrates the regime’s power to dominate him. The soldier comes to know about himself, and about the others, that each can be made to subordinate to state authority not only his body, but also his imagination; he knows that he is capable of inventing and declaring dreams that are unbelievable and not, in fact, his own.

I suggest that, at the very least, this reading of the “costs of the performance” is open to different interpretations, one of which is similar to that of Cobb’s: the sense of having “put one over” on a powerholder. After all, the culture of subaltern classes throughout history is filled with “trickster” figures (e.g., Brer Rabbit, Till Eulenspiegel, Aesop’s Fables, the Buddhist Jataka stories, the Malay world’s mouse deer, and even Shakespeare’s Falstaff) who represent the use of cunning, cultural knowledge, and the gullibility of the powerful to make their way in a structure of power they cannot, in the short run, change. The quasi-universality of such counter-narrative culture heroes in archaic hierarchical societies should make us doubt that subaltern classes lack the cultural resources to emphasize their agency, even in bad-faith performances. Why shouldn’t such command performances by the powerless demonstrate as often their manipulation and craftiness instead of their atomization, demoralization, and *being* manipulated rather than manipulating?

PASCAL, DOES THE FACE GROW TO FIT THE MASK?

I have learned so much from the subtlety, nuance, and insight of *Ambiguities of Domination* that I find my critical faculties challenged. Each time in the course of two readings when I had formulated what I considered a legitimate criticism, the author would write, in effect, “Yes, of course, I thought of that objection myself and let me explain how I account for it.” Frustrating for someone trying to formulate a constructive

critique! So, if I have a critique of the book, it would be that Wedeen wants to have her cake and eat it too. As a consummate thinker and debater, she jumps from one carefully elaborated position to an equally well-argued position that in large part contradicts the first.

To be more precise, in the early part of the book, Wedeen agrees with Pascal, who claimed that if you did not have faith in God, you should just get down on your knees and pray four times a day and the faith would come. If you wear a constant smile and express sympathy, even if it is initially an as-if performance, over time you will become an amiable and sympathetic person. In other words, the face will grow to fit the mask and no longer will be a performance at all but rather your authentic self. This is what I take to be the case made in

the course of the book’s first three chapters. It is the case for the “naturalization” of bad-faith subservient performances and habitus.

Then, in chapter 4, “Signs of Transgression”—with its account of jokes and cartoons that made me fall in love with the Syrian sense of humor—Wedeen severely qualifies the assertions she made in the first three chapters. Here, we begin to see the fissures in the performances, the backstage laughter, and the carefully crafted, quasi-public inklings of dissent and even repudiation. What we do not get—for that is not her quarry here—are the conditions under which the widely shared disillusion and contempt held in check by power relations are likely to break out and present an overtly public challenge to the rulers. As Wedeen notes, the transgressive practices in the Syria that she is observing have not risen to the level of open defiance and, for the moment at least, “The cult displays obedience, thereby helping to ensure it” (1999/2015, 152).

One reason why these questions fall outside of Wedeen’s remit is simply that the “tipping-points” and “cascades” to which she refers are frequently exogenous, contingent events that change the balance of power and perceptions of it for all of the actors in a political system: a storm, an earthquake, a defeat in war, an economic collapse originating abroad, famine and crop failures...a pandemic. It is arguably impossible to understand the Russian and Chinese revolutions without the havoc and political repercussions of, respectively, the defeat and desertion of Russian troops on the Western Front in World War I and the Japanese invasion of China in World War II. As a more modest and contemporary example, many have argued that the “lockdown” during the COVID-19 pandemic exposed an unprecedented number of television viewers to repeated images of the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, leading to massive, nationwide public demonstrations against racism in policing. Misconduct by the police was *not* contingent, but its juxtaposition with “sheltering in place” *was*. Contingencies, by definition, cannot be predicted (although their probabilities often can be estimated).

Political science has little of value to say about such exogenous contingencies. What it should have something to say about, however, are the fissures, the cleavages, the animosities, and the pressures that—although held in check by authoritarian rule—are likely to burst when contingency strikes. That is, we have little to contribute to identifying the possible sparks that might set off a conflagration, but we absolutely should have something to say about the buildup of combustible material that such a spark might ignite.

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Neither should we forget that not all political outbreaks are touched off by exogenous events; many are endogenous. How do we understand the initiation and timing of the civil rights movement in the US South? How do we understand how and why it “caught on” and led, among other things, to the Voting Rights Act? How do we understand the timing of the August 2020 popular uprising in Belarus? Is there a critical mass or threshold that would help us to understand how the disillusionment and silent dissent of a “cowed” population becomes active, open opposition? Finally, recall that the overwhelming majority of such outbreaks have been crushed by coercion, thereby changing the credible threat to other would-be rebels. When, against the odds, they do prevail, what impresses me is that the performances that Wedeen points to seem to disappear instantly with hardly a trace. That they do evaporate suggests that they are indeed “thin,” skin-deep performances that are easily shed.

WHERE DO WE LOOK FOR THE RADICALS?

The implicit assumption shared by Wedeen and, for that matter, most social scientists interested in dissent is that the nucleus of radical dissent is to be found among those most disabused and cynical about the existing structure of power. Willis's (1977) powerful argument has long persuaded me that we may be looking in the wrong place. For those unfamiliar with Willis's analysis, I summarize the part that is relevant to this analysis. He examined an English high school culture and divided that culture into

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two broad groups: the “lads” and “the ear’oles” (the lads’ insulting term for them). The lads in this working-class school already are disillusioned and cynical about the promises of school; they do the minimum amount of work, mock the ear’oles and the school culture while generally avoiding the worst penalties, and protect one another in their acts of disobedience. Short of open

rebellion, they manifest their disbelief and contempt for the entire enterprise.

The ear’oles, conversely, conform to official school norms; they try to get good grades; they obey the rules; they are attentive and work hard; and they embrace the implicit promise that if they conform to the school’s public expectations, they are likely to achieve a middle-class job and standard of living.

Willis’s counterintuitive claim is that we should not expect rebellion and labor militance to emerge from the lads. They

not only are cynical and disillusioned; they also see no point in futile efforts to overturn the system. They entertain no illusions about upward mobility; they want to “get by” and “get on with it.” The lads anticipate a wholly apolitical life in a working-class job and evenings at the neighborhood pub. Their culture is both patriarchal and racist, but they are politically passive.

The ear’oles are another matter. They have bought into the promise that the school as an institution implicitly holds out for them. In a Gramscian sense, they have chosen to conform to the hegemonic promise that a modern regime must hold out to even the lower classes: that the system can be made to work for them. On that premise, we could say that the ear’oles pay heavy dues every day at school. Although they may win approval from their teachers, they suffer daily harassment and contempt from the more numerous lads who dominate the student culture. They daily sacrifice time that they might have spent playing sports or carousing in doing homework, on striving for good grades, and—in school itself—they pay a heavy price for modeling conformity and adherence to the normative promise of the school. To use a neoliberal metaphor, they are heavily invested in the school model of obedience, hard work, good grades, and upward mobility.

The problem, of course, is that for many of the ear’oles, their sacrifices will prove to have been in vain. Unlike the lads, they are more likely to feel deeply betrayed by the “system.” Unlike the lads, they have spent much of their young lives foregoing many of the immediate pleasures of youth, enduring ridicule, and chasing a dream that has evaporated. They, and

not the lads, Willis tells us are far more likely to become working-class militants and radicals, nursing a lifelong sense of anger and betrayal. The lads, conversely, never had any expectations about the “system” working for them: they are, as it were, “pre-disillusioned” and, by not sacrificing and conforming, have no sense of being betrayed by a promise they never credited.

The originality of Willis's (1977) claims is that radicalism is far more likely to spring from those who are "true believers" than from those already thoroughly disillusioned and merely "going through the motions." The ear'oles are not as-if actors, and it is precisely their sincere beliefs and the daily price they pay that sets the stage for their deep sense of betrayal and therefore their radicalism.

If Willis is correct, then it is in the Gramscian promise to subalterns and its inevitable betrayal that we must look for the probable sources of radical dissent. Perhaps we should spend

more time trying to understand the "all-in" classes rather than the "as-if" classes. ■

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