

Ambiguities of Domination: 20 Years Later and We Are Still Not Getting It Right

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Why is Lisa Wedeen's (1999) *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* still foundational for the study of authoritarian politics more than 20 years after its publication? It is no exaggeration that since *Ambiguities*, the field of authoritarian politics has yet to meet the complex and nuanced analysis of citizens' cognitive and behavioral mapping in the context of autocratic politics. Today, Wedeen's book still speaks to the most cutting-edge debates on citizen political engagement and participation in these settings. However, the field—with its new analytical tools and technologies, from surveys to big data analyses, including social media and other platforms—has yet to parallel Wedeen in the sophistication and scope of her argumentation. Whereas the book first made an impact as an original and astounding perspective on politics in Syria, it has since become a powerhouse resource, one that scholars turn to repeatedly. Almost every work on authoritarianism, populism, and repression in the Middle East engages with *Ambiguities*, and it continues to provide a treasure trove of insights for scholars in all career stages.

Ambiguities underscores the importance of multidimensional citizen “acquiescence” in the face of a coercive omnipresent regime. Most of the literature on authoritarian politics codes the masses as either dichotomously supportive or defiant (with other studies maintaining that the masses are altogether inconsequential). Wedeen outright rejects these classifications and categories and posits that they do not capture the nuance and complexity underlying a deliberate civic strategy of acquiescence.

At its core, this politics of acquiescence is about an engaged citizenry that cognitively and privately rejects the regime and its pervasive and domineering presence while simultaneously engaging in the performative and behavioral rituals that lend credibility to the cult manifested by the same regime. For Wedeen, this is part of the “politics of as if”—in which citizens act as if they support the regime even while they oppose its very essence. Wedeen collected these incredible insights during her years of deep political ethnographic immersion in the context of Syria.

Indeed, more than 20 years later, scholars studying mass political attitudes and behavior in authoritarian settings still struggle to adequately capture the complex and dynamic logics that citizens use in their daily “compliance” as they engage in the deliberative performative “politics of as if,” conditioned by

the symbolic manifestations of Assad's cult. For the masses in Syria, regular rituals create an atmosphere of ambivalence to ensure that individuals do not agitate against the government. Individuals often observe outlandish public demonstrations that consolidate the regime's stability: “Asad is powerful because people treat him as powerful; spectacles are enactments of the people treating him as powerful, thereby helping to make him so” (Wedeen 1999, 146). A politics of as if—in which individuals demonstrate obedience and subservience to the regime—creates the sense that the regime is dominant and able to make Syrians compliant in its most outrageous gestures. In short, Al-Asad does not need to foster the consent or adulation of the masses; he simply needs to capture their public displays of support.

With novel insights about life in Syria, grounded in the manifestation of cultural power from Assad's cult, Wedeen sets the stage for a novel paradigm that underscores this multidimensionality when studying autocratic political behavior. Too often, survey and other quantitative approaches are simply “too” unidimensional, missing the underlying nuances and intricacies of authoritarian participation. I argue that these scholars of authoritarianism, including myself, are still struggling to do justice to Wedeen's contributions more than two decades ago.

Wedeen's politics of as if relies on two essential elements that behavioralists in authoritarian settings should emulate continuously in their own work. First, Wedeen brings to this study not only a deep appreciation of the authoritarian context in which the Assad regime perpetuates a cult; she also theorizes the ways in which this context shapes the “ambiguities” of citizen orientations and behavior. This deep appreciation of context-specific structural dynamics is vital to Wedeen's work.

Second, Wedeen's insights at the core of the politics of as if rely not only on uncovering the hidden transcripts of citizens but also on mapping out the disjuncture between these transcripts and behavioral outcomes, which include formal and informal forms of political and civic engagement. Although quantitative survey work has made significant advancements in uncovering hidden transcripts—often referred to as social-desirability bias and implicit versus explicit reasoning—these approaches still dichotomize these behaviors. Little advancement has been made in replicating Wedeen's mapping of the multiple and nuanced facets that link attitudes on behavior in contexts in which citizens are engaging in a politics of as if.

Scholars of autocracy often ponder the significance of personalized regimes that allocate resources and energy espousing an image of self that not only is comical but also overzealous and indulgent. What effect do these regimes have on citizens? Does this overwhelming presence aid authoritarian entrenchment? Is this a sign of regime weakness or strength? Are citizens ideologically committed to the regime, or do they succumb to its coercive capacities? What happens to citizens in these types of settings? Although these questions

Thus, for Wedeen, a critical point is to ensure that we understand the ways in which the cult shapes the “relatability” of citizens to the regime. Assessing these regimes based on mass behavioral measures alone—whether voting for the party, participating in pro-regime protests, or publicly asserting allegiance to the Assad regime and the Ba’ath Party—does not necessarily (and cannot) tell us the “true” degree or “type” of support that exists in a polity for an authoritarian regime. As Wedeen (1999, 84) states:

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are unresolved, Wedeen argued that the al-Asad cult is a new type of political tool wielded by postcolonial regimes, which—unlike their European counterparts—simultaneously confronted the dual tasks of state and nation building with fewer resources. This cult strategy stifles dissent in two ways. First, by “cluttering public space,” it makes it impossible for “alternative symbols, discussions, and language” to be articulated (Wedeen 1999, 33–49). Second, by underscoring the president’s presumptive role as head of Syria’s “national family,” it is a trope that promotes “understandings of obedience and community in terms of a chain of filial piety and paternal authority that culminates, and stops, in Asad” (Wedeen 1999, 49–65). Indeed, the cult is an efficient means to build political order, state, and nation.

However, our classification schemes for such regimes seem to miss the mark. Coupled with “visible” mass support for the persona, party, and regime, scholars such as Linz (1975) argued that the ideological “glue” that held the authoritarian equilibrium together and legitimated the cult veered toward totalitarianism. Syria would fit this prototype—except for the fact that although citizens profess support for the regime, they simultaneously are resisting the regime in their private settings. They perform the rituals of support out of a fear of coercion rather than conviction. They appear to applaud the

...individual participation and the attitude of impotence that attend compliance uphold these mechanisms of control. A politics of ‘as if’ carries important political consequences: it enforces obedience, induces complicity, identifies and ferrets out some disobedient citizens, and organizes the symbolic context within which struggles over the meaning of the nation, of selfhood, and of both political power and individual transgression take place.

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Wedeen’s insights into the politics of as if reveal two other crucial factors for understanding political behavior in autocratic settings. The politics of as if requires researchers to fully grasp two underlying dimensions of this “behavioral” outcome. The first dimension of this conceptual category is the “hidden transcript,” which was championed by James Scott (1990) and was inadequately approximated in simplified dichotomous categories in quantitative survey work in the form of social-desirability bias and implicit versus explicit orientations. We can argue that whereas these insights were groundbreaking for the study of authoritarian politics—especially studies based in the Middle East—this idea of “concealment” or a “manufactured” discourse was gaining

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regime but, in private, they ridicule their own participation. When given the opportunity, they eagerly use comedy to affirm their true beliefs and help them cope with their daily paradoxes. Hence, on the behavioral surface, Linz (1975) appears to be correct. However, this classification falls short because it fails to understand the motivations behind such support.

tractability in comparative and American political behavior more generally.

It is the second dimension of the politics of as if that is groundbreaking and compelling. In my opinion, it is this second dimension that we, as scholars of authoritarianism, still struggle to approximate. This dimension of the politics of as if is based on Wedeen’s incredible ability to map the

disjuncture between private preferences and public displays of behavior by uncovering the “true” motivations rather than the simple reliance on assigning these preferences (based on utility functions that may or may not resonate with citizens) in works on preference falsification. Her contribution, 20 years later, still remains unparalleled in the field. Most works on authoritarian politics assume that orientations directly map onto behavior. It is here that Wedeen challenges (indeed, forces) her behavioral cohorts across the board to reexamine the assumptions that they bring to the table. Wedeen’s “public dissimulation” implies that behavior need not reflect preferences. This is the essence of this second dimension, and it is captured well in Wedeen’s (1999, 160) own words:

Examining political practices of obedience and also looking at the ways in which people subvert them suggests, as Paul Veyne puts it, that “political life does not gravitate exclusively to the poles of spontaneity and constraint. It is more varied.” This variety consists of constant friction along the demarcation lines between rulers and ruled, and with each person. Symbolic displays of power offer us the opportunity to “watch” skirmishes as they are represented in a regime’s idealized presentation of itself and in people’s experience of their political lives.

Thus, Wedeen brings to the study of behavior in autocratic settings a nuanced and complex conceptual dimensionality of citizenship under autocratic rule. It is not one that can be

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ascertained easily by public opinion polls alone; neither can it be measured solely by behavioral outcomes. The orientations of citizens also *cannot* be monolithically (and unidimensionally) assigned or assumed *ex-ante*. Uncovering the hidden transcripts and social-desirability biases is insufficient for capturing a politics of as if. To adequately operationalize a politics of as if and to precise her conceptual category requires us as researchers to juxtapose our understanding of the internal logic that citizens deploy (based on grounded fieldwork and not simply assignment of these preferences) against the behavioral activities in which citizens engage. Only then can scholars truly speak to a politics of as if—indeed, to the ambiguities that citizens deploy as they “behave” publicly while simultaneously and deliberately supporting and resisting the regime.

Wedeen’s ability to map the vital disjuncture between explicit and implicit orientations and political behaviors, based on her political ethnographic immersion, remains one of the most outstanding treatments of authoritarian citizenship to date. I often ask myself whether existing survey tools can help get us closer to Wedeen’s *Ambiguities* in more quantifiable and systematic forms of analyses. It is fair to say that, more than 20 years later, we are still struggling to get it right. Certainly, new survey technologies are better at uncovering implicit biases. Yet, the behavioral outcomes that Wedeen

examines in her book are not those that can be measured easily in a survey instrument. Wedeen’s behavioral outcomes are operationalized through her interactions with Syrians in everyday encounters. Whether it is jokes in taxis, winks on the street, or conversations over coffee, these everyday interactions are the types of behavior that are not readily captured in a survey instrument. Wedeen’s insights are based on her immersion as a political ethnographer in Syria, where she began to understand and unpack the “language” of opposition. This language is linked not only to the spoken word and behavior but also to symbols and performances linked to regime opposition. Syrian citizens have learned to undermine the legitimacy of Ba’thi rule by constructing novel reformulations of permissible slogans and symbolic imagery. The networks, time, resources, interviews, conversations, friendships, and ties that Wedeen nurtured as she worked on this project underlie the ingenuity of this project. Through her methodological approach, Wedeen (1999, 25) asserts, “I hope to explore the advantages, costs, and political significance of public rituals, while at the same time supplementing those concerns with a symbolic interpretation of the actual content of Asad’s cult.” This symbolic interpretation is at the center of Wedeen’s politics of as if.

Wedeen’s methodological approach certainly enabled her to reach her remarkable insights on Syria. This approach, however, would not have been possible without the neces-

sary time in the field. As I wonder whether future work can ever approximate Wedeen’s potent interventions, I remain rather doubtful. Two transformations in our field understate the requisite amount of time scholars spend doing actual fieldwork. The first is the big data revolution sweeping the social sciences and that continues to grow. Because the discipline increasingly values big data, this push is not necessarily accompanied by efforts to enhance fieldwork funding and research training to meet the associated empirical demands. Second, because the data demands on students are increasing, this affords little time and effort for fieldwork. Furthermore, the current funding structures of PhD programs (i.e., five years) also afford little time for fieldwork (Jamal 2020).

More than 20 years later, scholars are still struggling to approximate and emulate Wedeen’s remarkable insights into the politics of as if. This work would not have been possible without the deep-seated commitment to political ethnography that Wedeen brings to her work. Whether quantitative scholars can help us get closer to operationalizing this concept remains to be seen. Meanwhile, it is crucial to ensure that students of political science continue to access their fields of studies. There is no substitute for in the field research. Conversations, engagement, participant observation, and ethnography are vital to the knowledge production and fine-tuning of

our qualitative and quantitative instruments to capture the complexities of authoritarian political life in more systematic and nuanced ways. ■

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