Lisa Wedeen, *Authoritarian Apprehensions: Ideology, Judgment, and Mourning in Syria*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019. ISBN: 9780226650609 (paper); ISBN: 9780226650579 (cloth); ISBN: 9780226650746 (ebook)

The Syrian conflict is difficult to speak about; or, at least, it is difficult to speak about with any confidence of being meaningfully heard. It is immensely complex, ignored by most people most of the time, and clothed in choking miasmas of uncertainty, exhaustion, and grief. The seemingly endless appetite among many "Syria watchers" for color-coded maps[1] showing where all the battlefield players are today ironically speaks to the problem: consumers of these maps may not agree on which colors to root for, what the maps mean, or what (if anything) should be done in response, but at least they can all say, *There It Is.* These neatly framed and scaled images function (despite explanatory additions from their creators) as a way of being able to say what is happening without being required to say anything about it. Inadequate as it may be, being able to say what is happening is no small thing. Regarding Syria – and an increasing number of other matters and places – the "what" of "what happened" is relentlessly fought over by a welter of distinct narrative communities, further alienating the much larger masses of the disengaged. Utterances that venture so far as "how", "because", and "therefore" are accordingly sapped of effect. Too painful to look at for some and too contested to judge for others, Syria has become doubly unspeakable.

Lisa Wedeen's *Authoritarian Apprehensions* is about this problem (Chapter 3). Simultaneously, it is about the role of popular ambivalence in authoritarian resilience (throughout), and about possibilities for responding to both phenomena illuminated in Syrian works of art and comedy (Chapters 2 and 4). The title, Wedeen explains, is a triple entendre: it refers to capture, to understanding, and to anxieties. This choice reflects Wedeen's characteristic care with language and the nature of the book. *Authoritarian Apprehensions* is a work in facets. While the core themes of interpellation, disavowal, ambivalence, and temporality do form a

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[1] Examples are available at https://syriancivilwarmap.com/, https://syria.liveuamap.com/, or a Twitter search for "Syria map". To get a sense of consumers' divergent responses to these maps, Twitter is most revealing.

resonant whole, they swell in and out of foreground and background in an unusual rhythm as the book tacks from economic geography to comedy, from disinformation to sectarianism. This almost tidal feeling is one of the book's admirable qualities; it is an honest reflection of the subject and of the author's grappling with it.

Wedeen's overarching interest, demonstrated in over 20 years of work on Syria (Wedeen 1999) and Yemen (Wedeen 2008), is to understand why governors and governed continue to invest in political practices that they know to be based, in a memorable phrase, in "excessive bogusness" (Wedeen 2008: 74). *Authoritarian Apprehensions* fits snugly into this project with its attention to the "I know very well, yet nevertheless…" of disavowal (Mannoni 1985). It is concerned with how people can continue investing in the promises of a social order they know will never deliver. In setting out to examine how President Bashar al-Asad reconfigured the political arrangements inherited from his father, Wedeen begins with Syrians' 2000-2011 disavowal of the knowledge that the "kinder, gentler version of autocracy" (p.2) presented by the younger al-Asad would never truly reform itself. She terms this rearrangement "neoliberal autocracy": an authoritarian system that manages dissent less through overt coercion than with the implicit threat of its return, combined with people's fantasy investments in the offer of "the good life" via consumption, self-reliance, and other familiar features of neoliberalism. As the war overtakes this reconfiguration (and, with it, the book), disavowals proliferate: they appear in the ambivalence of the *ramadiyyin* ("gray ones") who take no particular side in the conflict (Chapters 1, 3 and 4), television series that seem daringly critical but turn out to be quietist (Chapter 2), adoption of sectarian narratives regardless of their factual bases (Chapter 5), and so on. Ultimately, the book is concerned with what does *not* happen: why did so many Syrians avoid choosing a side? Or, more broadly, what stops so many people from investing in social transformation here and now, rather than someday?

Wedeen argues that all these disavowals illustrate the function of ideology as "work[ing] through seduction, arousing fantasy content while simultaneously defusing it and smoothing out contradictions" (p.163-164). The "nevertheless" of disavowal lives in this power to smooth and defuse. Particularly in contexts characterized by uncertainty, the fantasy of behaving as though

what one knows to be untrue is true – that the state will reform itself, that the good life is coming, and so forth – becomes seductive. Chapter 1 shows that neither drought nor economic geography explains the spatial/demographic distribution of the uprising and eventual hostilities: who exactly became interpellated as loyalist, dissident, or "gray" requires further explanation. As elaborated in Chapter 3, the murk generated by deliberate and unintentional distortion of information makes it difficult or even impossible for many to exercise the political judgment that could enable different responses. What remains available is an ambivalent quiescence structured by ideology. This analysis is applicable beyond Syria. It is pertinent to a growing number of places where material conditions are worsening, reactionary politics are rising, and resistance to such projects is less widespread than one would hope; where there seem to be many "gray ones".

Expanding from the disabling of political judgment, *Authoritarian Apprehensions'* engagements with interpellation and mourning outline related troubles in how people are or are not enabled to respond to their situations (see Chari 2017: 160-161). Building on Althusser's (1971) parable of the citizen hailed by the policeman, Wedeen emphasizes that interpellation is a three-part process: hailing, response, and recognition *of* the response by the hailing authority. It is well established that this sequence of interpellation contains a temporal conundrum: the citizen responds to the call because she already recognizes that it names her, yet it is in responding that she is produced and recognized as the subject so named. For Wedeen, the "retroactive fantasy" (p.8) of "seemingly precocious receptivity on the part of the subject-in-formation" (p.9) is tied to affective politics. As she argues in Chapter 5, similar temporalities emerge from threat. Threats retroactively call on past experience and precociously burden the future. Even when they go unfulfilled in the present, an excess anticipation remains. When a rumor circulated in the majority-'Alawi[2] district of Lattakia that "Sunni gangs" were out to murder them, many people went along with the idea despite *knowing very well* that the evidence supporting the rumor – a rash of slashed car tires – was the work of regime loyalists (p.141-146). This disavowal is enabled by latent structures of feeling: despite the state's post-2000 insistence on an official doctrine of multisectarian coexistence, minority subjects could be hailed *as* besieged minorities

[2] A minority sect closely, though not universally, identified with the al-Asad family.

precociously – or, just as well, retroactively – on the basis of residual sectarian self-understandings from earlier decades. It is also enabled by affective threat: even if the slashed tires were not a sign of Sunni aggression, they *could have been* and *someday might be*.

This phenomenon is ripe for geographic theorization on a materialist basis. A question I have been asking myself for some time is how authorities shape populations' ability to respond, and what this means for people's environments and ability to get on with life. With "ability to respond", I refer to Astrid Schrader's notion of responsibility. Schrader argues that responsible practice must include creating conditions that allow others to respond to oneself, or "an enabling of responsiveness" (Schrader 2010: 277). Schrader works within Karen Barad's (2007) onto-epistemology, which holds that entities and subjects are produced as distinct, separable things through acts of measurement. Measurement, as a material-discursive practice, entails making "marks on bodies", whether this means the impressions of photons on a screen or the marking of persons as, for example, disabled or gendered.

Limiting populations' responsiveness is not simply a matter of censorship or repression. It means a material denial of the ability to participate in events, to shape one's surroundings and, in doing so, to shape one's production as a subject. I think repeatedly about the reported words of an unnamed Iraqi protester from October 2019: "We finished the protest and nothing happened. So we decided to burn down the governorate building" (Osman 2019). An attempt to claim space through protest – to respond to a call to be interpellated (and so *responded to*) as citizens worthy of notice and other meanings associated with protesting – received no recognition, and so the protesters moved on to making a stronger material-discursive, spatial mark. Equally often, I think of Omar al-Shogre, a survivor of torture in Syrian prisons, insisting that "There is a lot of evidence [for state abuses]. There is the wounds on my body" (CNN Newsroom 2019). Here the double unspeakability of the Syrian conflict is the mode of "irresponsibility" in Schrader's sense. It denies "marks on bodies" as mattering (in both senses), despite that they can do nothing else: "causality is an expression of the materiality of traces, which demand to be accounted for" (Schrader 2012: 151). It is through this denial – the keeping-open of questions, about both the what of the conflict and its whys and therefores – that a variety of disavowals become possible.

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Wedeen narrates this process as the disabling of political judgment; as I see it, such disabling is one important way to deny responsiveness.

Schrader's version of measurement is temporal. She extends Barad's framework hauntologically (Derrida 1994)[3] by showing that measurement produces the entities involved not only materially but in time: prior to the measurement, no agencies or objects of observation exist as such (Schrader 2010, 2012). When these entities become defined through measurement, their pasts and futures (and relationships to each other in time) are also defined. Measurement is temporalization. Irresponsible practice thus includes building assumptions about time into the conditions such that they foreclose possibilities for "establish[ing] … a relation between 'past' and 'future'" (Schrader 2010: 293), and so overdetermine what such relations might be.

The case of the slashed tires, with its precocious-retroactive invocation of sectarianized subjects, makes an exemplary instance of such foreclosure. The incident can be read as the state's making marks to "measure" a minority population's availability for interpellation as sectarian subjects; under these conditions of measurement, as much of this population responds affirmatively, 'Alawis are interpellated as, indeed, sectarian. This case is unique in *Authoritarian Apprehensions* in that the associated material mark is actually noted. A geographic approach to Wedeen's concerns would look for the marks occurring in space that anchor other interpellative measurements – including the production of ambivalence as an inability to respond. The regional literature offers resources for such inquiry (Sharp 2019): Marwa al-Sabouni's *The Battle for Home* (2016) argues that some of the conflict's enabling conditions are located in an architectural shredding of the social fabric, while Asef Bayat's *Life as Politics* (2013) attends to how "the urban dispossessed" produce themselves and their environments through everyday acts of claiming the spatial necessities of life in "the quiet encroachment of the ordinary" (Bayat

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[3] Hauntology is an ontological argument, holding that the complexity and non-linearity of time means that entities are not simply present or absent. Rather, existence is structured by the presence of what is absent and the failure of what is present to be sufficient to itself. It critiques attempts to ontologize things as complete, sealed off against their specters; and contemporaneous with themselves, rather than entangled with inheritance from, and debt to, the past and future.

2013: 43-65). Geographers' longstanding engagements with the right to the city, the production of space, and the everyday can add to such contributions while also being enriched by them.

Wedeen's remarks on mourning occupy Chapter 4 and the Conclusion (appropriately titled "At a Loss"). She argues that the various summonings of nationhood through film performed by the state and its oppositions "sought to control what counted as experience" (p.108) under Chapter 3's irresponsible conditions – that is, "shared conditions of violence in which people no longer find themselves in possession of an intelligible world within which to make judgments" (p.109) or, in my reading, to respond. Schrader (2012) notes that temporalization in measurement also depends on memory, in that measurement creates traces. Therefore, responsible practices must also enable the *memorial* responsiveness of all involved: "the time reconstituted through inheritance … becomes topical – a 'chronotope' … where 'topos' does not simply refer to a place but to a site of engagement or a matter of concern" (Schrader 2010: 297). In this sense, Wedeen's "controlling what counted as experience" means constructing a chronotope[4] within which responsiveness is channeled through the sorts of temporal and memorial foreclosures described above (see also Meyer 2016) – or re-enabled. Different chronotopes enable differing ideas of what "counts" as mourning; what and who can mourn and be mourned, and where mourning can take place. Wedeen never gives a singular definition for the phrase she repeats, "the work of mourning", but it is clear what she means. She means accounting truthfully for loss. Doing so requires establishing conditions of responsiveness that allow for political judgment without excluding the recognition of multiple positions of mourning; she terms such openness "non-sovereign" (p.138). Non-sovereign chronotopes are "training spaces for political otherwiseness … incitements to do the imaginative work entailed in ongoing processes of political judgment" (p.139).

This work of mourning has a spatial dimension. Wedeen herself insists as much: Chapter 4 attends closely to the spatial imaginations of the films it considers. This attention is piecemeal,

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[4] "Chronotope" is a primarily literary term for represented configurations of narrative spacetime (see Bakhtin 1981). For Schrader, it means the way that a measurement's set of stakes shape its conditions and therefore its material and temporal effects.

however, and never named as a thematic concern. I find it productive to acknowledge that there is a commonality to how space functions here: these chronotopes are hauntological.[5] "The work of mourning" is familiar from Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (1994: 9), defined as:

> … attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present, in the first place by *identifying* the bodily remains and by *localizing* the dead … Nothing could be worse, for the work of mourning, than confusion or doubt: one *has to know* who is buried where.

This goes simultaneously to the problem of truthfulness that underpins the denial of responsiveness, and to the very real desire to prove that the remains *are remains* by locating them. If remains stay *there* where they are, what is lost cannot return *here* to haunt its survivors. It is thus suggestive that Wedeen refers to the nation as an "absent presence" (one of Derrida's chief descriptions of specters) in Chapter 4; it is this ghost that many of the texts under examination attempt to summon forth and to pin to a grave with sovereign chronotopes, the kind that try "to control what counts" as mourning and mourned (p.108).

The non-sovereign texts, however, construct chronotopes that enable responsiveness by welcoming specters (as Derrida insists we must). Whether the losses here are mourners, mourned, or both is not necessarily defined. The director Ossama Mohammed narrates his own work from exile: "I saw myself dead in the shot and I heard the voice, 'Such a pity, he was still strong, but he couldn't bear the distance. I died.'" (p.131). These texts identify and locate the dead (whether individuals, places, or the nation that was or could have been) without pinning them to the spot; the films visit them fleetingly, leaving and returning (reminiscent of McCormack's [2010] concept of remotely sensing affective afterlives). Non-sovereignty extends to conflict itself: "an everyplace of war" (p.123) in these films invokes war and its losses as something neither unique to Syria nor to be borne by Syrians alone through, counterintuitively, tiny openings and closed rooms.

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[5] On spectral geographies, see Degen and Hetherington (2001), Holloway and Kneale (2008), Maddern and Adey (2008) and Roberts (2012).

I offer this reading of Wedeen's arguments to bring out their latent spatial dimensions. By knitting some of her temporal and spatial points together slightly differently, I hope to have shown how her work can be extended without losing its sensitivity to the Syrian conflict or its wider political implications. For Wedeen, mourning and other responses remain impossible while judgment is out of reach; judgment requires shared understandings of truth; such shared understandings are rendered impossible by the nonresponse of ambivalence; and such nonresponse is brought into being through ideological investments in disavowal. These processes can be understood as irresponsible temporalizations that deny the capacity for responsiveness. This understanding allows all facets of *Authoritarian Apprehensions* to be translated into spatial registers by looking for the marks of measurement (interpellation) and the (dis)locations of the dead (the work of mourning).

In an "everyplace of war" (p.123), to be responsible is to respond to this condition and to enable others' responsiveness: to "recogni[ze] … our interdependence and nonsovereignty" (p.132). Wedeen closes *Authoritarian Apprehensions* by describing the book as "an early and provisional effort" (p.166) to do the work of mourning what could have been otherwise and what has been lost – in Derrida's (1994: 82) words, "in memory of the hope". No one can ask more than this, nor could I offer it.

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