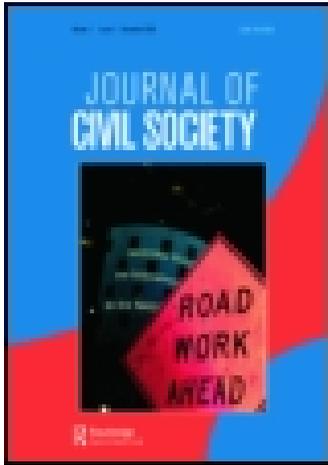


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INTRODUCTION

The Ambiguities between Contention and Political Participation: A Study of Civil Society Development in Authoritarian Regimes

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The development of social organizations and protest movements is exponential not only in authoritarian regimes like China and Cuba, but also in newly ‘democratized’ countries whose institutional modes of functioning remain chiefly authoritarian like Russia. Resisting any trajectory towards liberal democracy, contemporary authoritarian regimes seem to accommodate themselves to a wide range of expressions of discontent and even, sometimes, to thrive on them. Those paradoxical phenomena are relevant to study because they give us insights into the adaptation and transformation of authoritarian governments, which happen to be more flexible than most social science literature tends to acknowledge. This special section departs both from a deterministic perspective, which has long prevailed in political science—that of transitology—which necessarily links the rise of organized contention with the undermining of authoritarian rule, and from the counterpart theories on ‘authoritarian resilience’ (see, e.g., Nathan, 2003), which mainly explain the authoritarian regimes’ durability by over-emphasizing ruling parties’ propensity to suppress discontent as well as their own capacity to adapt, without taking into account the social dynamics involved in the process. Our study goes against the very idea of ‘resilience’, which implies that authoritarian rule endures *despite* social discontent and thus remains beholden to the ‘society against the state’ model dismissed by several authors as irrelevant to authoritarian polities (see, e.g., O’Brien & Li, 2006; Hsu, 2010; Lewis, 2013). Contributions gathered in this special section argue to the contrary that authoritarian regimes last in part *thanks to* certain forms of discontent by showing that the way they are expressed is an integral part of authoritarian governance.

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How, in the light of collective action, can we analyse the operating modes of authoritarian governments and thus attempt to redefine their nature? Relying on a political sociology perspective, such issue framing runs counter to mainstream approaches in political science that—from Aron (1965) to Linz (2000)—attempt to define political regimes resorting to typologies. Relying on quantitative methods, namely large datasets and often identifying regimes with political systems (Whaman et al., 2013), such classifications fail to explain how authoritarian regimes respond to new challenges and how new arrangements between state and society are being made. Shunning classical mainstream variables (such as whether there are elections, multipartism, repression, etc.), we emphasize an interactive and relational conception of state power to demonstrate not only how popular protests are being ‘absorbed’ by authoritarian states (Lee & Zhang, 2013) but also more fundamentally how the very modes of wielding power are being reconfigured.

In order to explore this question, this special section draws on the Cuban, Russian and Chinese cases to investigate how the relations between the state and civil society, which is broadly defined as citizens’ mobilization to defend their rights as well as those of other citizens, are being reshaped. The three contributors use a qualitative method of investigation, relying on intense fieldwork and long periods of immersion within particular social spheres, namely activist groups at the margin of the cultural sphere in Cuba, human rights organizations in Russia, and the world of labour activist lawyers in China. In doing so, these articles not only stress the capacity of authoritarian governments to adapt by designing new rules and institutions for controlling and incorporating civil society into the state, but they also shed a new light on the nature of contentious mobilization. Cases investigated here indeed exemplify the necessity to study how authoritarian rule can be challenged and reproduced at the same time. Showing how contention is always dependent on the boundaries of what is permitted and assessing the impact—marginal rather than structural—of mobilization, all the articles presented thus emphasize the ambiguities between contention and political participation.

The three articles gathered here indeed show that illiberal regimes do not endure only thanks to their capacity of repression but rather also thanks to their ability to allow some space for organized contention and citizens’ participation within the framework they have chosen. Authoritarian governments set the rules of the game, which are—consciously or not—accepted by activists who are not aiming at radical regime change anymore (as was the case for example for Chinese participants in the 1989 democratic movement or Russian human rights organisations that helped bring down the USSR by supporting Boris Eltsine against Mikhail Gorbachev at the end of the 1980s) but are eager to act effectively within the constraints of these regimes. While striving to make their claims heard by the current governments and thus to appear legitimate in the governments’ eyes, social actors in return legitimate the party in power. Focusing on state–society dynamics and on mechanisms that allow for the reproduction of authoritarian governments, this special section hence highlights the emergence of new forms of consent and collaboration that account for the transformation of the authoritarian rule, especially its modes of wielding power and of reviving its legitimacy.

Investigating the Cuban case since the fall of the Berlin Wall, Marie-Laure Geoffray argues that we need to understand how social and cultural claims are being both intentionally and unintentionally disconnected from political claims in order to explain how the Cuban government has been able to deal with growing discontent and heightened interest

in politics. While it selectively chooses to repress, the main and most successful way the Cuban government manages protest is by channelling it towards less harmful, largely de-politicized forms of participation. Either by creating channels for ‘legitimate’ political participation at the local level or by supporting identity-based movements (such as the one of rappers or gay people) while circumscribing them to the socio-cultural sphere, or even minimizing the impact of successful mobilization for the release of political dissidents by turning a defeat into an event beneficial to their image, the Cuban authorities have been successful in taming potential challengers to the authoritarian rule while securing a broader popular basis for continued socialist rule.

Françoise Daucé focuses on the changing and ambivalent relations between the Russian government and local human rights groups, namely the Moscow Helsinki Group. She argues that Russian authorities’ tendency to replace physical violence against activists by legal and administrative procedures for controlling them as well as their acknowledgement of a so-called ‘civil society’ evidenced by new opportunities for financial support and institutionalized cooperation has led to a growing depoliticization among human rights groups characterized by the groups’ insistence on maintaining dialogue with the government and on abiding by the law, even when it is deemed illegitimate. The civilized oppression of those groups by the Putin government is thus echoed by the civic involvement of Russian non-governmental organizations (NGOs), who are now claiming that their role is not to compete for political power or to support political parties as they did at the end of the 1980s, but merely to monitor the government and help to build a strong civil society. This abandonment of partisan action goes along with the invention of new forms of mobilization, as evidenced by the demonstrations against electoral fraud held during the winter 2011–2012, when human rights activists attempted to defend Russians’ civic rights with ‘civility’, playing a moderating role with respect to both the state and the most radical demonstrators. However, if this ‘civilized resistance’ (my coining) enables NGOs to continue to act officially, it also plays by the game of the authoritarian government as it prevents any revival of political pluralism.

Finally, my contribution, which focuses primarily on the dynamics of contention, explores the phenomenon of activist cause lawyers in China and argues that their (sometimes successful) attempts to mount legal challenges to protect migrant workers’ rights have had paradoxical impacts. Far from undermining the dominance of the Communist Party and existing structures of political control, the engagement in public interest litigation and administrative litigation has the effect of reproducing the non-democratic power relations and reinforcing existing structures of political domination. At the same time, legal mobilization opens up a democratic space within the authoritarian regime: it allows for limited political participation in law enforcement and law amendment that compels the Party to remain somehow engaged in protecting individual rights and the common good. But as it provides ad hoc checks and balances to the most pervasive abuses without advancing law predictability and infallibility and puts pressure on the Party so that it constantly adapts and maintains its legitimacy, moderate court-centred mobilization also contributes to the regime’s durability. The most fundamental political challenge has emerged from a different type of legal mobilization: the involvement of lawyers in negotiations between workers and factory management, outside the state and judicial system. These often-successful examples of collective bargaining directly challenge Party supervision and the All China Federation of Trade Unions’ monopoly over workers’ representation—hence the regime’s political foundations—but

eventually remains dependent on court-centred, top-down legal reform to bestow legal protection for autonomous workers' representatives. For the time being, the Party's refusal to undertake such reform underscores its will to keep these experiments as an ad hoc mode of regulation of labour conflicts aimed at perpetuating rather than undermining the authoritarian system.

The three articles thus identify three mechanisms of depoliticization that explain why organized contention can coexist with authoritarian rule and even consolidate it, namely: intentional as well as unintentional disconnection between social and cultural claims on the one hand and political claims on the other hand; insistence, on the part of human rights groups, on sticking to dialogue with authorities and abiding by the law; and the recourse to moderate court-centred legal mobilization that allows both for limited political participation constraining political power and for participation in the reproduction of authoritarian rule.

In doing so, this special section highlights how boundaries between democracy and authoritarianism are becoming blurred and, following authors such as Dabène et al. (2008) and Camau and Massardier (2009), contributes to defining neo-authoritarianism by emphasizing its hybridism. Showing that political power appears to be not only much more localized and fragmented than previous literature tended to acknowledge, but also that citizens are directly taking part in the way authoritarian rule is being wielded, this section ultimately stresses that authoritarianism cannot be defined by an overconcentration of power and authority in the hands of a single party anymore, but rather by a subtle coexistence of elements of democracy and authoritarianism.

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