Review of Marlies Glasius (2023) Authoritarian practices in the Global Age

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Book Review

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What is authoritarianism? How should we understand authoritarianism in the age of global interdependence? In her latest monograph, Amsterdam-based academic Marlies Glasius challenges the popular ideas that authoritarianism resides exclusively within the realm of nation-states and the simplistic bifurcation between democracy and authoritarianism. So much of the discursive rendering of authoritarianism in mainstream and scholarly discussions highlight a methodologically nationalist bias (Chernilo 2006; Regilme 2014), which systematically privileges the nation-state as the primary unit of analysis, often overlooking or underestimating transnational and global factors. As one of the key outcomes of a large research grant from the European Research Council, this book promises to introduce a novel practice-oriented framework that examines authoritarianism in settings where the primary unit of investigation is not the state or any single institution. Accordingly, authoritarian practices refer to a series of actions, rooted in an organized context, that undermine accountability to those under the influence of a group of actors or their representatives particularly by suppressing their voice and limiting access to information (Regilme 2021; Tushnet 2014). Notably, Glasius claims that a practice-based approach not only shifts the emphasis from nation-states to influential actor configurations but also frames authoritarianism as a dynamic phenomenon rather than a mere absence of accountability; it acknowledges the need for solutions in cases of accountability sabotage. The other sections of the book focus on two central elements of authoritarian practices: the suppression of voice and the restriction of access to information. Afterwards, Glasius focuses on the accountability demanders, analyzing their vulnerabilities, strengths, and the significant global developments influencing various groups of "information professionals." In the conclusion, Glasius acknowledges the popular belief about the erosion of state power due to unelected actors, but warns that such a phenomenon should push us to stay away from nostalgically motivated nationalist agendas of "reclaiming control"; rather, the main objective should be to intensify the call for accountability.

The book is written in a clear and accessible manner, and an educated reader from outside academia is likely to follow easily the discussion. Policymakers and

civil society activists seeking fresh insights into the mechanisms of authoritarian practices and practitioners involved in global governance will find this book particularly beneficial. Scholars of comparative politics, human rights, International Relations, political sociology, and public administration will find the theoretical insights of the book useful for other empirically grounded research projects. The analysis succeeds in several notable ways. First, the book inspires us to look into actual practices of authoritarianism in a wide variety of settings. Specifically, it examines various forms of accountability sabotage, secrecy, disinformation, and voice suppression. It offers a detailed exploration of these practices across different contexts, shedding light on their mechanisms, impacts, and implications. Second, the range of case studies offered here is quite comprehensive. The book examines contemporary real-world examples and concrete instances of authoritarian practices, which collectively illustrate the theoretical concepts. Third, it offers a quite promising research agenda that focuses on practices as primary units of political analysis.

Despite those analytical strengths, the discussion in the book raises some important questions that perhaps go beyond the initial remit of the author but are nonetheless demonstrative of the insufficiencies in the current research works in comparative politics and international relations.

First, the deployment of a practice-based approach in comparative politics may generate challenges in defining and operationalizing "practices," which are often construed as complex and multifaceted. One has to be transparent and compelling in establishing clear boundaries and benchmarks for diagnosing and analyzing practices as units of analysis. The determination of what is an "authoritarian practice" can be highly subjective and normatively-laden, and it is important to be transparent about the implicit normative commitments that underlie one's chosen set of criteria for evaluating if a practice is "authoritarian." For instance, an emphasis on context and cultural sensitivity in examining human rights practices, as suggested by Sally Engle Merry (Merry 2006, 2014), could be helpful in reflecting upon the limitations of Glasius' approach. It is essential to interrogate how analytical frameworks that define "authoritarian practices" could mute important discussions about the positionality of the researcher vis-à-vis the broader space of contestations that underpin a particular behavioral practice under investigation.

Second, the focus on practices as units of analysis has the potential to overlook structural and systemic factors that generate and sustain such practices. Although a practice-based approach accentuates individual political agency and dynamic interactions, that analytic choice may neglect the broader institutional, political, and socio-economic contexts that influence and constrain practices. For example, an exclusive focus on individual acts of censorship or repression may fail to consider the underlying global power dynamics and structural inequalities (not only the

current structures but also their historical underpinnings) that perpetuate abuses and evasion of accountability. Understanding authoritarian practices requires a holistic analysis that incorporates both individual agency and structural factors that carefully dissect the intersections of diverse moral conceptions, cultural elements, and historically path-dependent structures.

The book, in its conclusion, was somehow silent on the broader questions on global justice and the moral deficits of the contemporary global order. For a truly emancipatory world politics (Regilme 2018, 2021), is it enough that we just rely on accountability as the key normative principle of governance? The analytic danger on relying solely on practices includes the silencing of broader systemic injustices that were historically constituted and sustained through contemporary forms of market and governance structures. A practice-based approach may inadvertently atomize abuses at the level of individual or small-group political agency, while evading the more important moral task of interrogating, at the very least, the structural injustices that underpin the global system. This reminds us of the limits of human rights as rallying cry for political mobilization rather than human dignity and global justice; the former overemphasizes individual political agency at the expense of collective responsibility, while the latter two principles situate human welfare within broader structural and communal dynamics (Ibhawoh 2006, 2017; Mutua 2002; Regilme 2018, 2022).

Glasius' practice-based approach to studying authoritarianism, within the context of "normal science" (Kuhn 2012), brings both valuable insights and potential limitations to the forefront. In line with the principles of normal science, this book contributes incrementally to our understanding of authoritarian practices by refining and extending existing frameworks and current debates in mainstream social science. The inherent rigidity of normal science displayed in this scholarship, however, may render Glasius' approach somewhat limiting, potentially overlooking the nuanced variations in authoritarian practices across diverse contexts while evading first-order questions about the long-standing historical injustices of the contemporary global order. The tendency in "normal science," moreover, to resist radical paradigm shifts might impede the exploration of entirely new perspectives or understandings of authoritarianism. It is quintessential to evaluate these critiques, as well as the possible cultural and contextual blind spots, and explore opportunities for adaptation and innovation within the field to ensure a more comprehensive and dynamic analysis of authoritarianism. Maybe a "revolutionary science" outside the bounds of heavily funded research and academic corridors of power could provide more promising insights on how we can envision a global order underwritten by justice, sustainability, and universal human dignity.

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