

COMPARATIVE POLITICS

The Two Logics of Autocratic Rule. By Johannes Gerschewski. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. 297p. \$110.00 cloth. doi:10.1017/S1537592724000938

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After global democratization stalled around the turn of the millennium, political science shifted its attention to the nondemocratic side of the regime spectrum, mapped this diverse field, and designed novel explanations for the imposition and downfall of autocratic rule, as well as its impact on politics and policy. In line with the institutionalism pervading our discipline, many scholars highlighted the role of formal and informal institutions. In this increasingly crowded field, Johannes Gerschewski makes a significant contribution by reviving a systems-theory approach to identify the main mechanisms that undergird the stability of nondemocratic regimes.

Drawing on a much-cited typology he designed a decade ago, the author emphasizes that autocracies need to fulfill three functions: legitimation, repression, and co-optation. Legitimation has common citizens as its main audience and seeks to guarantee support (in systems-theory terms) either by propagating an appealing mobilizational ideology or by achieving a level of performance that satisfies the population's needs and interests, as chapter 2 thoroughly explains. Repression targets the opposition and seeks to contain or suppress demands by channeling or blocking collective action or by physically attacking, torturing, or killing adversaries (chap. 3). Finally, co-optation seeks to forge and maintain unity among elites through integration into formal organizations, especially regime parties, or through informal patronage and clientelism (chap. 4).

Based on these three pillars, Gerschewski reconstructs and adapts Juan Linz's seminal distinction of authoritarian versus totalitarian rule in chapter 5, the book's theoretical core. Different combinations of the modes in which autocratic regimes fulfill the three functions cluster into two distinctive logics: overpoliticization versus depoliticization. The former revolves around legitimation via an ideological vision, which "hard" repression pushes with ruthless violence and which elites integrated into movement parties spearhead with ceaseless energy. Linz invoked this totalitarian dynamism to characterize the extreme dictatorships of Hitler, Stalin, and Mao. But because few such tyrannies have survived, Gerschewski employs a looser notion of ideology, so that his concept of overpoliticization covers a broader range of regimes, including, for instance, Taiwan under Chiang Kai-shek (166).

Depoliticization, by contrast, rests on performance-based legitimation, which satisfies common people's latent

demands and thus requires only soft repression to preclude opposition challenges; indeed, large-scale violence would risk backfiring and provoking protests. Similarly, depoliticizing regimes buy off elites with patronage. By depleting the political arena in these ways, the top leaders can turn governance into smooth, nonconflictual administration, undisturbed by an apathetic populace.

Because the two logics of autocratic rule arise from the complementarity of these functional modes, Gerschewski conducts the empirical testing of his stability-focused argument not through variable-oriented statistical investigations but with paradigmatic case studies and qualitative-comparative analysis (QCA) à la Charles Ragin. As the most distinctive incarnations, North Korea exemplifies overpoliticization, and Singapore depoliticization. Chapter 7 also examines several other cases, including some that gradually switched from the former logic to the latter, such as Taiwan.

Thereafter, the fuzzy-set QCA of chapter 8 provides a systematic and comprehensive analysis of 45 autocratic regimes in post-World War II East and Southeast Asia (a regional focus explained in chap. 6). In this diverse set of cases, Gerschewski convincingly substantiates the predominance of the two main logics (along with two other country-specific paths) and demonstrates the underlying complementarity of the different modes of legitimation, repression, and co-optation. What emerges in a particularly clear and powerful fashion is that the performance legitimacy-sustaining depoliticization depends on the absence of hard repression; an autocracy that seeks to keep common people satisfied cannot shock and provoke them with a brutal crackdown (194–97). By contrast, ideological legitimation and state terror go hand in hand to propel overpoliticization.

Gerschewski's study offers an admirable synthesis of classical works on autocracy, starting with Carl Joachim Friedrich and Hannah Arendt, and various subsequent streams of writings. Moreover, he productively combines illuminating typology and sophisticated macro-theory with an ambitious multimethods approach to empirical analysis. At a time when many political scientists zero in on narrow topics and chase after regression discontinuities, it is inspirational to read an erudite piece of big thinking. Gerschewski displays intellectual courage in basing his interesting argument on an approach that most of our discipline has officially discarded (although it continues to inform scholars' theoretical thinking); namely, systems theory à la David Easton.

In many ways, the book's greatest contribution is Gerschewski's creative reconstruction of Juan Linz's seminal distinction of authoritarian and totalitarian rule (8–10, 124, 131–32, 194, 220). From a different, functionalist starting point, he convincingly develops the fundamentally different logics—overpoliticization versus depoliticization—that drive the two main types of

autocracy. Moreover, he usefully broadens the former category to make it applicable to the contemporary political world after prototypical totalitarianism has disappeared or, as in China, evolved into a unique type of multifaceted autocracy (206–8, 219–20): what Linz called post-totalitarianism.

But one wonders whether with his disproportionate attention to legitimation (38–74) rather than repression (75–90), Gerschewski depicts autocracy as too consent-based. The frequent reference to (tacit) social contracts (e.g., 15, 73–75, 117, 194–97) may overestimate the role of common citizens in sustaining autocratic rule: Do they really accept dictatorship as much as Gerschewski assumes, or does pervasive soft and hard coercion effectively deprive them of choice and agency?

In the book's neat conceptual and theoretical setup, each function—legitimation, repression, and co-optation—is designed to cope with one, and only one, sector that autocracies must control. Accordingly, Gerschewski depicts legitimacy as targeted to eliciting support from the broad population. But could it be sufficient for stability if an autocracy finds firm support among its staff—and these dedicated agents then use coercion to keep the citizenry in check against its will? After all, nondemocracies are felled much less often by popular uprisings than by elite splits and internal coups.

A related question concerns the main goal of Gerschewski's systems-theory approach, which is to explain the stability of autocratic rule. But what is more striking is the frequent instability of these seemingly

powerful regimes, especially the depoliticizing variant. Consequently, the emphasis in Milan Svoblik's *Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (2012) on violence as the constitutive mechanism of dictatorships may be a better starting point for capturing the nature of these regimes and their pervasive precariousness than Gerschewski's focus on legitimacy.

Regarding the wide-ranging empirical analysis, the two main logics emerge less clearly from the great diversity of cases than the powerful conceptual and theoretical reasoning would suggest. The QCA yields two additional country-specific paths, including a regime resting on naked, unlegitimated repression (187–94); moreover, post-Maoist China remains an anomaly (206–8, 219–20). Even with these deviations, the QCA's "overall solution coverage" amounts only to 70% (185). Note that these mixed and incomplete results arise in East and Southeast Asia with its relatively high proportion of communist regimes; that is, overpoliticizing autocracies. In regions such as Africa, Latin America, or the Mideast where such regimes were uncommon, Gerschewski's main distinction may provide even less analytical leverage.

Yet although this ambitious study does not resolve all the difficult issues facing the analysis of autocracy, it offers an impressively comprehensive treatment that provides many perceptive insights, yields a range of new findings, and advances thought-provoking arguments. With its cogent synthesis of the theoretical literature, helpful typologies, and interesting heuristic angles, it is highly recommended.