

Interpreting Authoritarianism: Politics, Practices, Meanings

Interdisciplinary workshop to be held at University of Exeter, UK

20-21 September 2010

Social scientists describe many countries across the world as 'authoritarian', yet only rarely do they inquire how local actors understand and experience the states in which they live. Authoritarianism is typically conceptualized as the tight hand of the state which restrains and constricts the liberties available to society. But this fails to recognise that authoritarian structures are not only material and institutional, but also symbolic and semiotic, embodied and enacted. Everyday understandings, grassroots encounters and routine performances maintain authoritarianism on a day-to-day basis just as much (if not more) than the best-laid plans of state elites.

This workshop will explore what interpretive approaches can tell us about the discourses, practices and politics of authoritarianism that other approaches cannot. How do local actors resist, negotiate and acquiesce to authoritarianism? In what forms, structures and spaces can 'authoritarianism' be found? What does 'authoritarianism' mean in daily life – and what do these meanings imply for our sense of how authoritarianism is reproduced or transformed over time?

The workshop provides an opportunity for interpretive researchers on authoritarianism in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Europe and the Americas to engage explicitly with the conceptual issues which inform their work. Although varied in style and procedure, interpretive methods share a common concern that questions of meaning, reflexivity and language should be placed at the heart of social inquiry. While such approaches are increasingly valued in empirical research across the social sciences, they sometimes lose sight of the potential commonalities between disparate cases and different disciplines.

The workshop therefore invites papers from across the social and human sciences (including political science, sociology, history, anthropology, geography, area studies, international relations, and related fields) which address theoretical, methodological, empirical or disciplinary issues related to the theme of 'interpreting authoritarianism'. Empirical studies of particular cases are welcome (whether from the developing, developed, or over-developed worlds) but should also engage with questions of broader conceptual relevance.

Issues and approaches of particular interest include:

- The utility of 'authoritarianism' as an analytical category; local understandings and discourses
- Action and inaction, political mobilization and demobilization, the production of apathy, resisting and reproducing authoritarianism, hegemony, governmentality
- Ethnographic approaches: everyday meanings, grassroots practices, social networks, informal politics
- Historicizing authoritarianism: genealogies, conceptual histories, textual ethnographies, archive stories
- The semiotics of space, human mobility and the built environment
- Interpretive post-positivist approaches (post-structuralism, post-colonialism, post-modernism, feminism, critical theory)
- Reflexivity in researching authoritarianism: problems of access, ethics, generating data, navigating identity
- Interpreting the (Authoritarian) State: issues in epistemology, ontology, methodology

Abstracts of 400 words or fewer should be submitted by 15 July 2010. The programme will be finalised by 20 July. Papers of 8-9,000 words should be submitted by 10 September 2010, to give discussants opportunity to prepare comments prior to the workshop. The aim will be for papers presented to be considered for publication in an edited volume or special edition of a major academic journal.

The workshop will be held on 20-21 September 2010 at the University of Exeter, UK. Travel and accommodation will be covered by the conference organisers.

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