

SEMINAR: CONCEPTUALISING AND OPERATIONALISING AUTHORITARIANISM

Part of the ERC funded project 'Authoritarianism in a Global Age'

Introduction to the seminar

The extent to which political scientists were caught off-guard by the uprisings in the Arab world suggests that the nature and sustainability of contemporary authoritarian rule are not well-understood. The theorization of authoritarianism as requiring absolute state control, epitomized by the classic works of Hannah Arendt or Juan Linz, would suggest that processes of globalization necessarily erode authoritarian rule. Yet at least some states appear to be highly globalized and highly authoritarian at the same time: citizens of China, Azerbaijan or Saudi Arabia may spend periods working or studying abroad, they may watch CNN, and stay in touch with friends abroad via Facebook or cellphone, without affecting the coercive rule of these countries by an unaccountable elite.

Unlike in the study of democracy, there is a dearth of contemporary conceptual work on the nature of authoritarian rule. In this groundbreaking seminar, we will reflect on whether authoritarianism is more than the opposite or residual of democracy, consider to what extent it is characterized by durable features beyond temporal and spatial variation, and whether it makes sense to think of authoritarian rule at levels other than the sovereign state. Following on from this, we will consider how one might operationalize contemporary authoritarian rule, and what consequences reconceptualization might have for empirical measurement.

Introduction to the broader project

This seminar takes place within the framework of the five-year (2014-2018) multi-method project *Authoritarianism in a Global Age: Controlling Information and Communication, Association and People Movement*, funded by the European Research Council, based at the University of Amsterdam.

The project's point of departure is that openness to global ICT and media, international NGOs, and inflow and outflow of people have thrown up new challenges, but perhaps also new opportunities for authoritarian rulers in terms of how to control citizens. Its guiding question is: *how is authoritarian rule affected by and responding to globalization of information and communication, association, and people movement?* In four sub-projects, it investigates:

1. Whether, how and to what extent globalisation of information and communication, association, and people movement affect authoritarian persistence (longitudinal quantitative studies)
2. How, i.e. with what policy mechanisms, authoritarian states respond to globalisation of information and communication, association, and people movement (qualitative multi-sited studies relating to three authoritarian-global ideal-type states)
3. How to understand the phenomenon of subnational authoritarianism in its engagement with the democratic state and the wider world (mixed method subnational studies)
4. What authoritarianism *is* in a global age. The project starts off with a working definition of authoritarianism as defined by the combination 'low accountability/high coercion', but will consider whether these characteristics, and their coupling, are indeed the most durable and salient features of authoritarianism, whether they are also 'the opposite of democracy', as well as whether they still relate exclusively to statehood (theory study).

PROGRAMME

JUNE 5: DAY 1 CONCEPTUALIZING AUTHORITARIANISM

LOCATION: Universiteits Bibliotheek C1.13 (Belle van Zuylenzaal),

Session I: Welcome and Introduction

9.30-11.00 - Initial speakers: Lisa Wedeen; Carles Boix

Authoritarian rule is often categorized, but rarely defined other than in a residual way ('non-democracies'). Is a substantive definition possible? Should it be a collection of conditions, not all of them necessary in all cases? If categorization is the only way, how can authoritarianism itself still be a conceptual category?

Session II: Change and continuity over time

11.30-13.00 - Initial speakers: Jørgen Møller; Pedro Ramos Pinto

How far should we go back in conceptualizing authoritarian rule over time? Authoritarianism has been theorized particularly in relation to modernity and modernization, but does this still help understand its character in recent decades? How does contemporary authoritarianism (across space) differ from its manifestations in the 1930s or 1970s? What are its durable features?

13.00-14.00 Lunch – Vondelzaal (Room C1.08)

Session III: Change and continuity in space

14.00-15.30 - Jason Brownlee; Kelly McMann

Is authoritarianism really a global conceptual category, or do 'categories' of authoritarianism conceal such distinct regional variations that the general concept does not hold? How does the existence of subnational authoritarian enclaves within formally democratic regimes impinge on our conceptualization of authoritarianism? Are there limits to subnational democratization within authoritarian states? Does it make sense to also label transnationalised and/or privatized forms of governance 'authoritarian'? How do different levels and forms of authoritarianism and its absence overlap?

Authoritarianism and its opposite: learning from democracy studies

16.00-17.30 – Initial speakers: David Beetham; Baogang He

Can developments in the conceptualization of democracy help conceptualize authoritarianism? Is it useful, for instance, to think of authoritarianism in terms of (lack of) participation or deliberation? If forms of accountability and deliberation beyond the state can be characterized as 'democratic', or containing elements of what constitutes democracy, can we also think of distinctly authoritarian practices beyond the state? Is the distinction democratic/authoritarian still helpful, either in binary or graduated form or are there better alternatives?

17.30 Drinks; Dinner

JUNE 6: DAY 2 OPERATIONALIZING AUTHORITARIANISM
LOCATION: Universiteits bibliotheek C0.01(Potgieterzaal),

Session V: Elements of authoritarianism

9.00-10.30 - Initial speakers: Agustina Giraudy; Milan Svolik

What – if any - elements of authoritarianism capture its essential nature beyond temporal and spatial variation? Or if there are no such features, what are the crucial elements to understanding and measuring contemporary authoritarianism? The ERC project takes as its point of departure ‘low accountability, high coercion’, but these are very broad and abstract terms, and relative rather than absolute in nature. Is reference to the absence of political pluralism more helpful than accountability? What about the role of consent in authoritarian systems?

Session VI Operationalizing accountability and its absence

11.00-12.30 - Initial speakers: Jennifer Gandhi; Andreas Schedler

What consequences does the, now nearly universal, institution of periodic elections, sometimes containing elements of competition, have for the measurement of autocracy? Are ‘hybrids’ a real category, or should measurements just get better at detecting fake democracy? How does one measure the independence and power of judiciary oversight? Can we recognize alternative forms of accountability, for instance in the shelving of unpopular policies or dismissal of unpopular politicians, and if so can such be measured? Can and should the accountability of suprastate and transnational forms of governance be measured in the same way as states?

12.30-13.30 Lunch – Vondelzaal (Room C1.08)

Session VII Operationalizing coercion

13.30-15.00 - Initial speakers: Oisín Tansey; Todd Landman

Is coercion indeed a constitutive element of authoritarianism? Can coercion be measured in ways that go beyond the measurement of repression? Should particular types of repression be considered as measures of authoritarian success, or as manifestations of failing coercion? Are there particular curtailments and violations of rights that are most associated with authoritarianism, or is authoritarianism a matter of degree and scale of curtailment and violation? Has the nature of repression changed in recent decades, and should measurements reflect the nature of these changes? Can and should repression by suprastate and transnational forms of governance be measured in the same way as states?

Session VIII Other elements ...

15.30-17.00

This session is deliberately left open to take account of your suggestions. Surveillance seems like an obvious candidate to discuss, but there may be many others...

Closing reflections

17.00-18.00