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BOOK REVIEWS

Dictatorship and Information: Authoritarian Regime Resilience in Communist Europe and China

Martin K. Dimitrov. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023. 496 pp. $34.95 (pbk). ISBN 9780197672938

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Ever since Douglass North received a Nobel Prize for his theory about institutions and information, these two words have proliferated in economics and political science. Especially in the scholarship on authoritarian regimes, it would not be unfair to describe a sizable proportion of the literature as follows: some "problem" of authoritarian rule stems from a lack of "information," and information in turn solves the problem of authoritarian rule (e.g., the principal-agent problem or the collective-action problem). Yet when we probe what constitutes the substance of contemporary theories of "information", we often find ourselves peering into an empty box. What is information, after all? While the word information is everywhere, sometimes it feels like it is nowhere.

It is in this jaded mood that this reader finds Martin Dimitrov's magnum opus *Dictatorship and Information* a breath of fresh air that blows away the smokescreen of "information" in political science. For this is a book that is actually about information. Inside the box that Dimitrov generously gifts us, we find spades, axes, hoes, adzes, pitchforks and wheelbarrows (p. 190); we hear jokes, dreams and rumours (pp. 103, 166–168); we feel the agony over the scarcity of spring lambs (p. 183) and the wilting of spinach (p. 186); we meet Baba Vanga, Bulgaria's most treasured clairvoyant (p. 288). We are given a play-by-play account of how the communist regimes in Bulgaria and China collected what they thought to be important information: not just intelligence on elite plots and foreign sabotage, but more importantly, information about the "bread-and-circuses" needs of their populations (chapter five). Dimitrov's use of the word "public mood" rather than "opinion" throughout the book is but one giveaway of the author's ethnographic commitment to understanding authoritarian rule from the expressed perspective of the regimes – opinion is sticky, mood swings – rather than the abstract perspective of statistics.

But *Dictatorship and Information* is full of statistics, of cold hard numbers spanning decades and continents – counts of state informants, persecutions, denunciations, letters, complaints, protests, all painstakingly constructed from over 1,000 archival sources from 30 archival repositories in eight countries and six languages (Bulgarian, Chinese, German, Russian, Spanish and English). Anyone who's done archival research knows that to find 1,000 useful sources one must have looked at least 10,000 of them. A hefty 445 pages and 1,742 footnotes (of which most are primary sources) – this book on information is itself a heroic feat of information collection. Not a single stone unturned, not even of the ethnic minorities that often get conveniently left out in books about China. The end product is a generative binder-full of sources for students of communist autocracies. It will be appreciated by serious theoreticians and historians alike.

At the summit of his Himalaya of information Dimitrov concludes: they knew. The book provides ample evidence that communist regimes in Eastern Europe were well appraised of the public mood, including the deteriorating economic situations in the 1980s and rising discontent, thanks to the intricate and intensively intrusive information institutions that they built. Top leaders in Bulgaria and East

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Germany were receiving perfectly good information on both elite and mass attitudes up until the very end of the communist regimes. And the collapse of these regimes had little to do with poor information.

This blows up the entire premise of the North-inspired scholarship on information and autocracy: that authoritarian regimes malfunction or collapse from a lack of information. One of political science's favourite scenes of autocracy is Nicolae Ceaușescu's rally on 21 December 1989: people showed up on Palace Square only to surprise him with a revolution. The standard story goes that because of "preference falsification," Ceaușescu was unaware of his unpopularity. Ceaușescu is not mentioned in the book – Dimitrov was careful not to touch cases for which his remarkable multilingual sweep doesn't cover – but the reader walks away with a suspicion that the standard Palace Square story could be either an exception or an exaggeration.

Dimitrov's career has been devoted to understanding communism and post-communism, particularly in China. This book will naturally draw a large audience for its deep dive into the China case. Here is where the beauty of comparative politics shines, for the Bulgaria–China comparison throughout the book makes it painfully clear that our understanding of China can be so limited without a truly comparative perspective. Dimitrov again uses cold hard numbers to unsettle common China myths. First is the idea that China practises unique "authoritarian responsiveness," which stems from a political culture of complaints and "performance legitimacy," that makes the regime longer-lasting than others. But as Dimitrov demonstrates, complaints in Eastern Europe were much higher than in China, regimes in Eastern Europe were much more responsive than that in China, repression was much lower in Eastern Europe. By the standard logic for the CCP's resilience, Eastern European communist regimes should have lasted. Except they didn't.

So why did the communist regimes in Eastern Europe fall? Well, if information is the panacea to authoritarian resilience, it would have made it simply too easy to stay in power. The problem is not everyone has the capacity to act on such information. At the end of the day, Eastern European communist regimes could no longer deliver their end of the bargain, so it was only "rational" to democratize (p. 276).

This doesn't mean the CCP has lasted thus far due to its high state capacity – another myth concerning China. Instead, state capacity was comparatively low during the Mao era and immediately after. The reason the CCP didn't collapse in 1989, Dimitrov argues, is because China and Europe offered different types of social contracts. The kind of socialist social contract based on high welfare provision – three-year maternity leave! – was simply absent in China both under Mao and now. Therefore the social contract held the regime to different standards. During the reform era, China adopted a "market social contract" with greater welfare provision. And its ultimate fate will depend on whether the regime can satisfy the populations' bread-and-circuses needs. In a surprising sense, post-Mao China comes out as more comparable than Maoist China to pre-1989 Eastern Europe in Dimitrov's book.

Yet Dimitrov shows that, despite all their differences, communist regimes of the 20th century built almost identical information collection institutions. One would not be shocked to find this isomorphism extended to other institutions. But why? Why are communist regimes "obsessed" with information collection? Why, despite different origins, did communist institutions end up so institutionally similar? It is not until the end of *Dictatorship and Information* that Dimitrov alludes to potential Soviet influence, but he stops there. This is the reader's lingering itch upon finishing the book – an itch that can perhaps only be scratched by another five hundred pages based on thousands of additional archival sources.

To conclude, *Dictatorship and Information* makes important contributions to political science, history, as well as "area studies" of China and Eastern Europe. Today's social scientists face the dilemma of appealing to their disciplines and staying faithful to their cases. Dimitrov shows that it's still possible to have the best of both worlds as long as one is so committed. In solving the "dictator's dilemma," he also solved the social scientist's dilemma.

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