Rethinking Authoritarian Transformations: The Plurality of Power, Resurgent Sovereignty, and Everyday Politics

A Rejoinder to Adam's "Zersetzung und Refiguration"

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ABSTRACT

In this rejoinder to Jens Adam's article on authoritarian transformation, I focus on his proposed analytic framework, highlighting its strengths while also offering three critiques. I commend his rejection of binary views of authoritarianism, particularly the simplistic opposition between democracy and autocracy, and his nuanced treatment of affect and institutional reconfiguration as core components of political transformation. However, I argue that his concept of "soft authoritarianism" simplifies the multiplicity of power logics, neglects the centrality of sovereign power, and overlooks the agency of ordinary people. Drawing on fieldwork in Hungary and insights from political anthropology, I advocate for a more granular understanding of power, relationality, and everyday politics under authoritarian rule and call attention to a key dilemma, i.e., "entering the orbit of power," which ethnographers face when they conduct fieldwork in such contexts.

KEYWORDS

authoritarian transformation, logics of power, resurgent sovereignty, everyday politics

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It is a pleasure to engage with Jens Adam's thoughtful contribution to the study of authoritarian transformation. His article proposes a conceptually ambitious framework for thinking through the current moment of political reconfiguration by carefully synthesizing Saskia Sassen's transformation theory, the anthropology of policy, the scholarship on the role of affect in politics, and key insights from fieldwork in Poland. What follows is offered in a spirit of collegial dialogue – as a continuation of earlier discussions – with the hope that my reflections may further strengthen the analytical conversation that his piece effectively sets in motion. Due to space constraints, I will primarily engage with the article's theoretical propositions for studying "authoritarian transformation," which merit deep scrutiny and attention. However, given the issue's focus on ethnography, I will also try to expand on Adam's list of the challenges that come with conducting ethnographic research in authoritarian contexts. But let me begin by outlining what I see as the article's main strengths.

Adam's insistence that authoritarianism is born out of liberal democracy – encapsulated in the metaphor of the "worm inside the apple" – is both provocative and persuasive. It serves as a much-needed corrective to the binary oppositions that often dominate public and academic discourse. Where some political science frameworks still treat "hybrid regimes" as anomalies, Adam asks us to look more closely at how liberal-democratic institutions themselves are being reworked from within. His matrix approach helps us trace these processes of erosion and refiguration with greater nuance.

Equally compelling is his adoption of Sassen's "analytics of change." Treating transformation as the reordering of extant institutional logics rather than as a rupture or collapse allows us to attend to the slow, layered nature of authoritarian drift (Sassen 2006). Democratic institutions, as Adam convincingly argues, are not merely dismantled but are frequently recalibrated and redeployed to serve exclusionary ends. His invocation of assemblages and organizational logics offers a powerful lens through which to understand these shifts.

Another signal strength of the article is its attention to affect. Adam rightly foregrounds the emotional climates, moral imaginaries, and symbolic scripts that underwrite authoritarian formations. By attending to the refiguration of the body politic through narratives of danger, gratitude, and purity, he aligns his analysis with the best of recent affective scholarship, notably the works of Ahmed (2004), Illouz (2023), and Mazzarella (2017). His ethnographic sensitivity to how such narratives circulate and sediment is especially welcome.

That said, I would like to offer three critical reflections on Adam's argument, or perhaps extensions on it, that I believe are important to consider for the study of authoritarian transformation.

1. Not One Logic of Power, but Several

While the notion of "soft authoritarianism" is analytically useful, I worry that it risks becoming too totalizing. Adam presents it as a singular political rationality that combines democratic legitimation with authoritarian and illiberal techniques (Glasius 2018). But what if, instead, we think of contemporary transformations as the convergence of multiple, sometimes contradictory, logics? Drawing on Charles Tilly's

processual vocabulary, we might consider how authoritarianism, illiberalism, and neoliberalism intertwine – each bringing distinct temporalities, institutions, and relational modalities (McAdam et al. 2001).

For instance, in my own research on the role of churches in Hungary's evolving governance regime, I argue that we need to integrate Gramscian and Foucauldian frameworks to understand how authoritarianism operates through both hegemonic incorporation and differentiated governmentality (Szombati 2026). The Hungarian case illustrates how illiberal rulers have enlisted churches not only to moralize public discourse and legitimate controversial policies like school segregation (the Gramscian dimension), but also to outsource welfare provision to faith-based organizations that blend care with discipline in order to exercise "pastoral power" on the margins of society (the Foucauldian dimension). These organizations, acting as quasi-governmental actors, help pacify marginalized populations while reinforcing class and ethnic hierarchies.

This concept of a dual mode of power – hegemonic and governmental – helps us grasp the heterogeneity of authoritarian governance. It shows how elites combine coercive, paternalistic, and neoliberal logics to rule. The churches do not simply reinforce soft authoritarianism; they transform it into a complex power-scape in which consent is manufactured, sovereignty delegated, and governmental power deployed in deeply stratified ways. If we fail to capture this multiplicity, we risk missing the complex dynamics that make authoritarian formations both resilient and adaptable.

One final note with regard to the relative importance of diverse logics and modalities. I find that there has been too little attention paid in the literature dealing with emergent authoritarian political regimes to the privatization of public services, the disciplining of society through techniques of responsibilization, and the atomization of publics after authoritarian conservatives take power. This doubling down on the neoliberal program, often concealed under the guise of working to restore "national unity," has been a central facet of governmental strategy in places like Hungary and Turkey; leaving it out of the analytical framework of "soft authoritarianism" risks rebuilding the analytic wall between liberal democracy and autocracy that the heuristic of "soft authoritarianism" was designed to dismantle.

2. Resurgent Sovereignty

Adam's emphasis on assemblages and diffuse governmental logics is insightful, but it may understate the return of sovereign power as a structuring force in contemporary authoritarianism. In the Hungarian context, which I know best, we are witnessing not only the erosion of democratic institutions but also the consolidation of a nested sovereignty, centered on the figure of the "leader" and extended through a web of delegated authorities (Szelényi 2016). Such "prebendalism," marked as it is by multi-scalar patron-client networks and reconfigured dependencies, cannot be explained solely through the liberal lexicon of accountability and rights. It demands an analytic attuned to authority, loyalty, and the remaking of relational bonds.

One powerful illustration of this return to sovereignty can be found in Hungary's workfare regime, a state-led but locally implemented program that has become central to the reordering of rural social life (Szombati 2021). In this system, local mayors exercise considerable discretionary control over access to public jobs, effectively transforming employment into a tool of political discipline and social control. Eligibility, hours, and conditions of work can be arbitrarily assigned or withdrawn, blurring the line between welfare and coercion. This decentralized yet highly asymmetrical structure represents a reassertion of local sovereignty under national illiberal rule. Such resurgent sovereignty is not merely symbolic. It reorganizes the terms of social life, particularly in rural areas where mayors and party brokers wield discretionary power over access to state resources. What emerges is a form of "illiberal paternalism," structured by asymmetrical dependencies but stabilized by promises of protection, recognition, and material support.

In such a setting, power is not just administered through bureaucratic procedures or technocratic governance; it is performed through personalized rule, everyday discretion, and the symbolic enactment of authority. The workfare program thus exemplifies how sovereign logics – manifested not only in the center but also on the periphery – are reorganizing the terms of everyday life. These microsovereignties consolidate dependency, reinforce political loyalty, and deepen citizens' exposure to paternalistic statecraft. Any analytic of authoritarian transformation must therefore reckon with such capillary forms of domination and their social embeddedness.

3. Everyday Politics

Finally, I would like to suggest that we give more sustained attention to the everyday, to the ways in which authoritarianism is lived, endured, and sometimes enabled from below. The global assemblage approach, valuable as it is for identifying macro-patterns, can sometimes obscure the textures of ordinary life. Here I find the works of James C. Scott and Javier Auyero indispensable. Scott (1990) reminds us that domination is rarely total and that the weak develop hidden transcripts and tactical evasions. Auyero (2000), in turn, demonstrates that patronage relations are not only vehicles of control but also sites of agency and negotiation. While both Scott and Auyero recognize the socio-economic and political constraints as well as the interpersonal dependencies within which people operate, they convincingly show that even those at the bottom end of the social ladder are to some degree able to get some things they want in exchange for cooperating with the powerful and participating in their projects.

Based on more than a decade of living and doing anthropology at home (Hungary), I am convinced that we would do well to draw on this tradition and look closely at everyday people's politics within social contexts where the authoritarian transformation is advanced. To move forward, we will most probably need to invent new concepts to make sense of the ever-evolving potentialities and limitations of localized politics in such places. Based on my own work in Hungary, I think that "room for maneuver" and "dancing with power" could be useful concepts for thinking about differently situated people's agency within hierarchical, yet not fully one-sided relationships, wherein the weaker party has the power not only to subtly subvert dominant logics of rule, but also to negotiate the terms of participation in circuits of

power. This partial, relative and dependent autonomy, however, also means that individuals, informal groupings, and formal associations are firmly imbricated with authoritarian power logics and circuits; which means (as Auyero claims) that while their habitus is (partially) formed through cooperation, they can also lose vital material or symbolic benefits if they fall out of power circuits or choose to step outside of them. This factor may in fact explain why authoritarian power is so difficult to challenge – at least until those in dominant positions can distribute enough resources to maintain flows of money, jobs, and other vital resources.

The more theoretical point is that metaphors such as "room for maneuver" and "dancing with the state" point to the partial, negotiated autonomy of actors who are enmeshed in authoritarian circuits but not fully captured by them. Understanding these dynamics requires not only an ethnographic tracking of refiguration across institutions and discourses but also situated ethnographies of ambivalence, compromise, and complicity.

The Ethnographer's Dilemma: Entering the Orbit of Power

Ethnographers seeking to conduct fieldwork-based research under conditions of "mature authoritarianism" face even deeper and more contorted dilemmas than the ones highlighted by Adam in what he calls "polarized fields." Due to the resurgence of sovereignty as a key logic of power (see above), and the hyper-presence of governmental propaganda even in the most remote places, ethnographers – especially those working in tight-knit communities or small places – can easily find themselves in the crosshairs of figures of authority who often have enough informal or formal power to force them to exit the field (for instance, by intimidating them or threatening to sanction people who engage with them). Fieldwork in such places thus necessitates constant contact and diplomacy with local power figures, who act as "supreme gatekeepers."

These relations present difficult (and often irresolvable) moral dilemmas and come with cumbersome side-effects, including the perception that researchers are too close to power or the suspicion that they are in fact controlled by power figures. Nevertheless, such contacts are not only practically indispensable but also present distinct epistemological advantages. Their most distinct advantage is to allow researchers to see how power is actually exercised and made durable (or not) in a specific space, community, or domain. They could then observe not only how opportunities and resources are distributed, but what kinds of exchanges take place between power figures and everyday people, how brokers facilitate and help negotiate such relations, and how all this influences local power figures' standing and room for maneuver. Moving within the orbit of power usually also gives ethnographers some insight into what options people have when asked or compelled to play a certain role in local circuits of power – i.e., their "room for maneuver" – as well as how they "dance with power" – i.e., how they strategize, what moral repertoires they mobilize to improve their negotiating position or exit negotiations, and how they narrate participation or non-participation (in public and private), etc. As I noted above, these relational dynamics are absolutely crucial as they effectively constitute the micro and macro-processes of "authoritarian transformation."

The caveat is that moving within the orbit of power tends to taint such ethnographies of ambivalence, compromise, and complicity in a particular way: It can make power seem more durable than it is, and it may conceal or minimize disillusionment, dissatisfaction, disgust, and other less obvious but potentially consequential affects. The obvious remedy – seeking out disillusionment – is unfortunately not always an option under conditions of hyper-polarization.

Conclusion

Jens Adam has made an important contribution to the ethnographic study of political transformation. His framework is conceptually ambitious, empirically grounded, and methodologically thoughtful. It rightly centers the processes by which democratic institutions are reconfigured from within, and it foregrounds affective and symbolic dimensions that are too often neglected.

My suggestions here are offered in the spirit of elaboration rather than opposition. I have proposed that we expand the analytic frame to better account for the multiplicity of power logics, the resurgence of sovereignty, and the micropolitics of everyday life. Taken together, these dimensions can help us build a more robust, grounded, and politically attuned anthropology of authoritarianism, one capable of grasping how power is exercised and made durable, affective, and intimate – albeit with the caveat that ethnographers who enter the "orbit of power" may fail to detect processes of corrosion and erosion.

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