

miriam cooke. *Dissident Syria: Making Oppositional Arts Official.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2007. vii + 208 pp. Illustrations \$21.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8223-4035-5.



Reviewed by Jonathan Shannon

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To live and do research in Syria is to confront contradictions at almost every turn. In a repressive state, artists not only create works that are critical of the regime, but in many ways, thrive. In an atmosphere poisoned by suspicion, self-censorship, and fear, people often openly express their political views, mock a system that mocks them, and continue to lead lives tinged not only with fear, but also with grace and beauty. What are we to make of a state that finances avant-garde cinema, then never releases it to its own public; commissions artists to create works that repudiate the regime; and imprisons authors, only to permit them to stage radical theater inside jailhouses? What is the role of “culture”—according to the late Syrian dictator Hafez al-Asad, “humanity’s highest need”—in a state that routinely denies the humanity of its own people?

miriam cooke explores these and other contradictions in her far-reaching, ambitious, and troubling account of creative production in “dissident” Syria from 1989 to 1996. Tackling the cen-

tral conundrum of how the arts, especially literature, drama, and cinema, can exist or even flourish in a repressive totalitarian regime, cooke advances a nuanced reading of the forms of control, resistance, and what she calls “commissioned criticism” among contemporary Syrian dissident artists. Her work explores new territory in granting the reader a glimpse of a world virtually unknown in the West: of brave (and not so brave) writers, dramatists, cinematographers, painters, sculptors, teachers, academics, and other creative intellectuals who struggle not only to make their voices heard, but to effect change in their country.

The preface to *Dissident Syria* sets the scene, outlining the history of censorship in Syria and the efforts of the regime of Hafez al-Asad to legitimize his rule through various forms of censorship as well as patronage of the arts. cooke argues that the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 was in many ways a turning point for Syria. Following other scholars, she sees the token relaxation of political control and censorship in this era as a

means to strengthen control over public discourse and define the limits of opposition. This is the context in which cooke explains the flourishing of “commissioned criticism,” the state’s commissioning of artistic works that critique the government (though never the president or his family) as a way of demonstrating a commitment to cultural opening, dialogue, democracy, and human rights. cooke demonstrates how these terms become mere slogans behind which lies the heavy hand of the Syrian state.

Chapter 1 offers an analysis of the contradictions of cultural production in Syria, according to which culture is simultaneously deemed “humanity’s highest need” and a source of political instability requiring strict controls. As in Eastern Europe (where many Syrian artists as well as politicians and urban planners studied), Syrian cultural production consists of the management of meaning and an assertion of control over the symbolic universe. But control can never be total, and Syrian intellectuals cultivate the art of acting “as if” they believe the state’s rhetoric while simultaneously unmasking its emptiness.[1]

Chapters 2 and 3 offer portraits of Syria’s most prominent female writers, analyzes the major themes of their work, and describes cooke’s encounters with them. The context is her proposed lecture on women’s literature at the French Institute in Damascus, whose title was (ironically) “Culture is Humanity’s Highest Need” (p. 19).

Chapter 4 explores the ambiguities of state authority and the contradictions of “commissioned criticism” in a variety of media: painting and sculpture, literature, drama, and cinema. cooke explains this strategy as offering an escape valve for popular frustrations as well as a “democratic façade” for the state: the state permits certain forms of criticism to help vent popular steam against a repressive system without encouraging insurrection. Commissioned criticism permits space for *tanaffus*, or breathing, but does not re-

sult in redressing injustices. Commissioned criticism thus works as a disciplinary mechanism for keeping political dissatisfaction in check.

Chapter 5 focuses on the dramatic works of the late Mamdouh ‘Adwan and Saad Allah Wannus. Both artists advanced critiques of Syrian society and culture while benefiting to some degree from state sponsorship or support. Wannus’s critique was perhaps the most effective, ultimately offering the most hopeful vision for change. cooke’s discussion of Wannus’s notion of *masrah at-tasyis* (the theater of politicization) reveals the depth of his understanding of the central problem facing Syrian civil society—the lack of spaces for dialogue. Wannus hoped that drama might help constitute such a space, while ‘Adwan envisioned the arts as playing a role in resisting the normalization of oppression, though not necessarily leading to revolutionary change. Both artists believed that the theater potentially empowers audiences “to think the unthinkable” by linking them in a “community of dissidence” (p. 91).

Perhaps the most interesting chapters in *Dissident Syria* are the last two. Chapter 6 provides an overview of Syrian cinema and an extended look at the works of several filmmakers. cooke focuses on the role of dreaming and memory in the construction of the symbolic language characteristic of Syrian cinema. Her discussion of the politics of Syria’s National Film Organization helps resolve the seeming paradox of a state that funds the production of films that are implicitly critical of the regime, yet almost never permits their exhibition at home. The state uses these films in its strategy of “commissioned criticism” to blunt opposition and present a façade of freedom and democracy, all the while strictly controlling the means of criticism. cooke argues that the mere existence of these films, even in the absence of their screening, plays an important role in forming a potential community of dissidence. Yet, given the fact that most Syrians avoid the cinema, and only the members of a select elite ever view Syrian

films when they are released, this seems a remote possibility.

Chapter 7 examines a genre increasingly studied in the Arab world: prison literature. Given the taboos associated with the mere mention of prisons in Syria, this chapter offers a remarkable glimpse of the terrors of the Syrian state and the extremes to which it goes to blunt criticism and restrict the possibility of civil discourse. Her exploration of prison literature picks up the motifs of *tanaffus* (breathing) and dreaming to reveal individual stories of detention as well as the larger dehumanizing effects of the regime's behavior. In some sense all Syrian literature is prison literature. But cooke's critique of the Syrian situation is balanced by an awareness that the prisons of a "rogue state" are not exceptions; we have the obligation to recognize our own political prisons and prisoners of conscience in the United States, where recent exhortations about exporting freedom and democracy have been shown to be as emptied of meaning as the slogans on the walls of Damascus.

The final chapter, in which cooke takes leave of Syria, concludes with an acknowledgement of both the terrors inflicted by the state and the dignity of many of the Syrians who live with the brutality of the regime every day.

The postscript takes us into the post-Hafez al-Asad era and addresses a real dilemma for scholars of the Arab world. Do we criticize the states in which we do our research and risk feeding the fires of neoconservative hatred and aggression toward the region and its people? Do we remain silent and, as cooke's interlocutors intimated, remain complicit in the regime's atrocities? This brings her back to the question of the role of the intellectual in society--ours as well as theirs. What are our commitments? How are they best served by scholarship and activism? What lessons can we learn from the Syrians (and others) who struggle with these issues every day? cooke's thoughtful

discussion reads as a call for us to confront the mystifications that not only poison our political discourse but endanger our freedoms and those of others.

In the end, frustration and sadness are the main threads of this exploration, and I put *Dissident Syria* down feeling depressed, recalling the episodes of frustration caused by the ever-prevalent attitude of "as if" and its twin, *ma'lish* (meaning something like "whatever" in American colloquial English). But I can't help adding that this important snapshot of Syrian culture, because it goes to great pains to expose a rotten system, does so at the risk of obscuring the daily joys experienced by so many Syrians, as well the strategies for coping, co-opting, thriving, and moving forward that they pursue.

Nonetheless, cooke offers a scathing critique of the current regime, a heartfelt identification with the dissidents among whom she worked and lived, and a thoughtful analysis of the contradictions not only of Syrian society and culture, but of scholarship on the Middle East as well.

For this reason this text should be required reading for upper-level undergraduate and graduate-level courses in Middle East studies, literature, human rights, politics, and public policy. The lessons to be learned from Syria, and from this analysis, extend far beyond the limits of Middle East studies or Arabic letters.

Note

[1]. This concept is central to Lisa Wedeen's analysis of Hafez al-Asad's cult of personality in her *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

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