

Ideology and Humor in Dark Times: Notes from Syria

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Touted by its publishers as the “most prestigious lifestyle and luxury magazine in Syria,”¹ the January 2011 issue of *Happydings* enjoined readers to accessorize with camouflage: “From combat cool to aviatrix chic, military style took fall runways by storm. We show how to pledge allegiance to the season’s hottest trend and work army accents into every look.”² A music video by Husayn al-Dik, the brother of a regionally famous crooner, echoed this aesthetic imperative with performers dressed in black-and-gray fatigues, matching hats, and lace-up boots dancing to his sexually suggestive tune “Natir Bint al-Madraseh” (Waiting for the School Girl).³

This essay draws on fieldwork done in 2010 and 2011. I was in Syria when the uprising started and stayed until 21 May 2011. I have subsequently traveled to Lebanon on multiple occasions and lived in Beirut during the summer of 2012. I also spent the winter of 2012 in Paris where I had the privilege of conversing repeatedly and at length with displaced Syrians. I have benefited from feedback on presentations at Brown University, Columbia University, the Council for Galician Culture, Georgetown University, George Washington University, Princeton University, Sciences-Po, Marquette University, the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (New Delhi), Northwestern University, the Orient-Institut Beirut, the University of Washington at Seattle, Yale University (twice), and in many venues at the University of Chicago. I am deeply grateful to Lauren Berlant, Bill Brown, Aurélie Daher, Pradip K. Datta, Michael Dawson, Donatella Della Ratta, Daragh Grant, Amaney Jamal, Kevin Mazur, John McCormick, Aziz Nakkash, Dana Omari Berg, Erin Pineda, Jennifer Pitts, Don Reneau, Osama Said, Dan Slater, Paul Staniland, and Steven Heydemann and Fawwaz Traboulsi for their careful readings of earlier drafts. Thanks are also owed to Dina Rashed and Rohit Goel for their excellent research assistance. My debt to Syrians named and unnamed is inestimable. This article is for them. Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.

1. mediame.com/country/syria/happydings
2. *Happydings*, Jan. 2011, p. 46; see also p. 41.
3. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=5VNzmyBAOPg

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So at odds with the ascetic, austere, tanks-in-the-streets reality of the 1980s, this shift from military apparel as a sign of coercive control to an accoutrement of market choice proved ephemeral, undermined by the reappearance of soldiers in the streets when protests got underway by mid-March. As demonstrations gained momentum and the regime responded by attempting to crush dissent, the public prominence of market-oriented preoccupations with lifestyle and luxury gave way to anxieties of conspiracy and disorder—at least among the country's staunch supporters of the regime. For others dreaming of an end to the regime or worrying more about crop failure or lax morals than what to wear to the party, the military's return to the streets nevertheless laid bare what is often identified as a key feature of autocracy—its reliance on coercive power to squelch unrest. Recent aesthetic displacement onto such concerns as fashion choices could no longer distract from the inequality generated by market openings and the endless deferral of political reforms. Nor could glamor and glitz obscure the regime's preference for handling protest by promising redress while acting to destroy all perceived threats to its survival. And, yet, even as Syrians were joining the protests in locales throughout the country—in Syria's two major cities, Aleppo (Syria's key commercial hub) and Damascus—the population failed to mobilize in significant numbers. The question is why not? And why did this reluctance to participate actively in the uprising seem to be changing in the spring of 2012—before events countrywide took an overwhelmingly violent turn, thereby making large-scale peaceful demonstrations unlikely anywhere?⁴

I want to argue that what might best be described, following Lauren Berlant, as an ideology of “the good life”—in this case, combining economic liberalization with fears of sectarian disorder and

4. To be clear, I am not arguing that populations in these cities will not end up demonstrating widespread support for the toppling of the regime, but they have not done so publicly yet, and the circumstances of outright war at present make large peaceful demonstrations unlikely in the near future.

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“nonsovereignty”—operated to organize desire and quell dissent.⁵ This good life entailed not only the usual aspirations to economic well-being but also fantasies of multicultural accommodation, domestic security, and a sovereign national identity,⁶ generating conditions for the sustenance of a neoliberal autocracy.⁷ Neoliberal autocracy implies two contradictory logics of rule, cultivating an aspirational consciousness for freedom, upward mobility, and consumer pleasure, on the one hand, while continuing to tether possibilities for advancement to citizen obedience and coercive control, on the other. These contradictions were mediated and managed in Syria through an image world that wedded private capital to regime/public control—epitomized by the glamorous, urbane, assertively modern “first family.” This first-family mimesis worked to produce the celebrity president, his elegant first lady, and their children as sites of aspirational consciousness in which individual responsibility, refined tastes, fashionable possessions, and domestic intimacy were exemplified.⁸ Fantasies of upward mobility were connected to acts of personal initiative and status quo stability rather than the quasi-socialist promises of state-initiated development or party cadre activism of the previous Asad regime.

A discernible ambivalence towards protest in Syria’s two most important cities during the first, predominantly peaceful year of the uprising needs to be understood in this context. Although authoritarian rule was longstanding and its stabilizing effects entrenched by the late 1980s, neoliberalism in Syria gradually emerged with “selective” policies of economic liberalization beginning in the 1990s, followed by ambitious privatization initiatives in the mid-2000s. Economic policies were, moreover, accompanied by a broad ideological outsourcing campaign structuring political commitments.⁹ In Syria under Bashar al-Asad, circles of privilege ex-

5. For a particularly generative discussion of the good life, see Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, N. C., 2011). Lauren Berlant’s use of *nonsovereignty* appears in “‘On the Risk of a New Relationality’: An Interview with Lauren Berlant and Michael Hardt,” interview by Heather Davis and Paige Sarlin, in “On the Commons,” *Reviews in Cultural Theory*, reviewsinculture.com/special-issue/review1.html. A discussion of sovereignty’s conceptual inadequacy is to be found in Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, pp. 97–98 and “Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency),” *Critical Inquiry* 33 (Summer 2007): 754–80.

6. By *multicultural*, here, I mean the way in which experiences of difference among Syrians, such as those produced by sectarian organizations or by distinct regional practices, were rendered *cultural* and thereby unthreatening in the official discourse. The concept of culture operates as a celebratory term to denote good, conflict-free, folkloric variety, unlike sect, which conjures up *fitna* or dangerous, destabilizing forms of societal discord.

7. *Neoliberal autocracy* is my term and could easily be applied to regimes such as China, Vietnam, and Singapore and a host of Middle Eastern ones as well.

8. Thanks are owed to Berlant here.

9. For informative political economy accounts of Syria, see Steven Heydemann, “The Political Logic of Economic Rationality: Selective Stabilization in Syria,” in *The Politics of*

panded and contracted at the same time, resulting in countervailing tendencies congealing some differences (the gap between rich and poor widened, with more people more prosperous in the two major cities) while producing new bases for inclusion. Access to technology, expanded possibilities for travel, a widening circle of financial and social networks associated with the first family's assertions of cosmopolitan living, and a growing familiarity with urbane tastes (if not necessarily the means to indulge them)—such novelties constituted an important shift under Bashar al-Asad. And they produced new modes of ideological interpellation, hailing citizens into Syria's autocratic system in complex, varied, often incoherent ways. These modes were only partly economic, were not always state initiated, did not require belief in order to be powerful (although they could entail it), and were unevenly saturating.¹⁰

My emphasis on ideological interpellation requires me to anticipate objections to this way of understanding the first year and a half of Syria's uprising; part one does just that. Part two offers a brief history of Syrian official ideology, identifying what was distinctive about Syrian autocracy under Hafiz al-Asad (1970–2000) and how some of those practices have persisted while others have changed significantly under his son, Bashar. My aim is to understand how these discursive conditions have affected political participation in these times of tumult. Part three discusses the merits of the concept of neoliberalism in terms of the ideological-material conditions it references. Although I have previously made a case for disaggregating the term, here I consider neoliberalism as part of a general, global phenomenon, despite its specificities and local instantiations. Drawing on the theoretical contributions of Berlant, Michel Foucault, and Slavoj Žižek, to name three key interlocutors, I argue that the workings of ideology need to be rethought in the context of capitalist market predom-

Reform in the Middle East, ed. Henri J. Barkey (New York, 1992), pp. 11–39, “Taxation without Representation: Authoritarianism and Economic Liberalization in Syria” in *Rules and Rights in the Middle East: Democracy, Law, and Society*, ed. Reşat Kasaba and Joel S. Migdal (Seattle, 1993), pp. 69–101, and *Networks of Privilege in the Middle East: The Politics of Economic Reform Revisited* (New York, 2004). See also Bassam Haddad, *Business Networks in Syria: The Political Economy of Authoritarian Resilience* (Stanford, Calif., 2012), and Volker Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria under Asad* (London, 1995), “The Private Sector, Economic Liberalization, and the Prospects of Democratization: The Case of Syria and Some Other Arab Countries,” in *Democracy without Democrats? The Renewal of Politics in the Muslim World*, ed. Ghassan Salamé (New York, 1994), pp. 243–69, and “Stages of Economic and Political Liberalization,” in *Contemporary Syria: Liberalization between Cold War and Cold Peace*, ed. Eberhard Kienle (New York, 1994), pp. 44–71.

10. See Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” *Lenin and Philosophy* and *Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York, 1971), pp. 127–86.

inance and the absence of alternatives (such as socialism) to it. In this light, I want to think of neoliberal ideology, in particular, not simply as a coherent worldview that is out there to be embraced in the manner of a party platform (although it can be made manifest in such political exercises and does embody identifiable principles) but rather as a seductive, particularly insinuating and largely implicit endorsement of market-mediated experiences of risk and pleasure. As ideology, neoliberalism is saturating without being fully naturalized, organizing lifeworlds in ways that also structure much dissent. In an effort to understand both the tenacity and incompleteness of ideological reproduction, part four focuses on how laughter operates for Syria's television-savvy citizenry under the market-oriented autocracy of Bashar al-Asad. Here I take as emblematic the work of Allayth Hajju, one of Syria's best-known television directors, for it registers both the grim realities of the decade just past and the evident seductions of the neoliberal turn. At times uncannily prescient, at times poignantly bleak, Hajju's comedy opens up alternatives to its own most conservative impulses, thereby demonstrating the potency and unevenness of ideological saturation. Or, to put this differently, his comedy illustrates and helps perpetuate the ideology of neoliberal autocracy; at the same time, it provides some openings for, while attempting to manage, an oppositional consciousness. All four parts of this essay are concerned with analyzing the spectrum of affective dynamics by which support among staunch loyalists persists, ambivalence matters, and resistance—even repugnance—is organized.

1. A Tale of Two Cities

In contrast to my emphasis on ideological interpellation, it might be argued that what kept large-scale resistance from developing in Aleppo and Damascus was simply the fear of repression. Undoubtedly, much coercive power was devoted to preventing rebellion in these two major cities. Yet efforts to suppress dissent elsewhere did not keep protestors from taking to the streets.¹¹ Moreover, when repression worsened in both the

11. For a document describing the precautions taken to prevent protestors from occupying the main squares in Damascus, see "Watha'iq al-Jazeera, takshif khitata taqti'a dimashq," www.aljazeera.net/home/print/f6451603-4dff-4ca1-9c10-122741d17432/1e033d23-caa8-41c7-a697-1394608eff05. The fact that so many infiltrators managed to succeed in Aleppo before the emergence of a violent war there, for example, prompts the question of why this was the case in Aleppo and not elsewhere. As is well known, the regime outsourced some of its security work to the notorious Birri clan whose leader's execution was broadcast publicly by opposition militia in a YouTube video criticized by human rights groups and regime supporters alike. The event did dramatize how collaborative arrangements that used to offer clear benefits were quickly becoming costly.

capital and in Aleppo in May and June 2012, resistance (although still relatively small) grew rather than diminished in response.

Another possible objection is that there have been more protests in these metropolitan centers, even from the get-go, than is often acknowledged. And this appears to be true. Protests after Friday prayers at the Umayyad mosque and a show of solidarity with the people of Libya in front of the embassy made residents in Damascus “early movers,” with a group of secular-minded activists often leading the charge. Flash mobs, funeral marches, and graffiti activism in both cities registered important, if small-scale, opposition to the regime.¹² Yet, all told, and in comparison with other less densely populated areas or protests in other countries such as Yemen or Egypt, these actions involved few participants.¹³

One seemingly compelling but ultimately inadequate argument points to the economic geography of the protests.¹⁴ In this view, the conflict is between the haves and the have-nots, and the explanation for relative quiescence in the key parts of Damascus and Aleppo has to do primarily with the two cities’ geographical distribution of wealth. On the one hand, there is evidence to support this explanation; according to activists on the ground, even the highly touted demonstrations in affluent parts of these big cities (such as the one in Mezze, in Damascus, on 18 February 2012) drew their crowds from adjacent poorer areas already accustomed to re-

12. Protesters have shown remarkable creativity at times. Some of the small demonstrations that occurred in downtown Damascus, even in the first year of rebellion, for example, featured savvy young people who used contemporary tactics such as flash mobs (in one instance twenty or so protestors all appeared dressed in white) or the release of hundreds of ping-pong balls marked “depart” to roll down from the top of the capital’s Mount Qasiyun. Anonymous announcements denouncing the regime have been broadcast from a remote-controlled loudspeaker positioned strategically in a downtown square, and the voice of Hama’s famous singer Qashshush (whose body was allegedly found with its larynx removed) could also be heard from inside a municipal building. People’s reactions, including the frantic attempts of security agents to locate the music, were filmed and uploaded to YouTube. These instances of creativity are important, but their impact has been limited. See Donatella Della Ratta, “Creative Resistance Challenges Syria’s Regime,” www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/12/20111222162349451619.html; “Irony, Satire, and Humor in the Battle for Syria,” muftah.org/irony-satire-and-humor-in-the-battle-for-syria/; “Syria: The Virtue of Civil Disobedience,” www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/04/20124283638298672.html; and “Dramas of the Authoritarian State,” www.merip.org/mero/interventions/dramas-authoritarian-state, which focuses on the entanglements between Syrian television producers and the regime. In this piece she also chronicles some attempts to “work the weakness” of the system, to borrow Judith Butler’s felicitous phrase (Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* [New York, 1993], p. 75).

13. At the height of protests in Yemen, for example, 25 percent of the population was estimated to have taken to the streets.

14. Thanks are owed to Kevin Mazur for his question at an earlier presentation at Princeton University in November 2011, which pressed me to consider in more detail the economic geographies of protest.

bellion.¹⁵ Moreover, citizens in drought-stricken areas of the countryside, in less well-to-do cities, in cities' outskirts, and in the markedly poorer parts of well-to-do neighborhoods *have* been remarkably resilient in registering opposition (both peaceful and armed) often at tremendous bodily risk. In contrast, old-money bourgeois families and the swelling ranks of the nouveau riche in the posh downtowns have generally favored wishing away the need for political transformation, as opposed to participating in the struggle to bring it about.

On the other hand, the conflict cannot be reduced to this sort of economic determinism; in poor areas throughout Syria, the demands being expressed are not simply or even primarily economic in character. In addition to persistent calls for the downfall of the regime, freedom, and dignity and, increasingly, assertions that God is great, some slogans cast doubt directly on economic interpretations of the uprising. Referring to the Syrian president's then-prominent spokesperson Bouthaina Sha'ban, people in an impoverished area in the coastal city of Lataqiyya chanted as early as March 2011: "Ya Bouthaina, wa ya Sha'ban, al-sha'b al-suri mu ju'an" (oh Bouthaina, oh Sha'ban, the Syrian people aren't hungry).¹⁶ Similar slogans have continued to undercut a purely economic understanding, pointing to an *ideological* geography of protest—one embracing divergent patterns of consumption and commitment, suggesting a variegated relationship to market-oriented openings and the pleasures they proffer. A housing boom in the 2000s made areas adjacent to the downtowns of Aleppo and Damascus a source of wealth for inhabitants who used to derive their income from harvests or small businesses. These families are now wealthy, but they nevertheless are understood by supporters of the regime in Damascus and Aleppo as different, as country bumpkins, simple folk (*darawish*), even nomads (*nawarin*)—all derogatory terms that lay bare how unreliably income maps onto political power or social status. Wealthy inhabitants in these areas of resistance go in for large families and are demonstrating a renewed commitment to pious practices in marked contrast to the lifestyle choices exemplified by the first family and its supporters.

Being wealthy, in short, does not necessarily imply identifying with the glitzy, assertively modern aspects of the "enlightened" (*tanwiri*) elite. And

15. Interviews with activists by author, Feb. 2012.

16. For a discussion of this slogan and similar ones being chanted in Dar'a, the heartland of defiance, see Reinoud Leenders "'Oh Buthaina, Oh Sha'ban—the Hawrani Is Not Hungry, We Want Freedom!' Revolutionary Framing and Mobilization at the Onset of the Syrian Uprising," *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Joel Beinin and Frédéric Vairel (rev. ed. forthcoming).

citizens attached to fantasies of the officially sanctioned good life are not necessarily capable of achieving it, of course. University protests in Aleppo and youth activism in mixed-income neighborhoods of Damascus suggest, additionally, important generational dimensions of contention and what appeared, at least for the brief period from May to July 2012, to be a growing willingness of middle-class youth to take to the streets, largely as a registration of moral outrage at regime excess. Even some of the merchants involved in the regime's brand of crony capitalism are reliably said to be funding the resistance. The success of a call for shopkeepers to strike in May 2012, as opposed to the resounding failure of the same move in May 2011, indicates that class interests and collective solidarities toward the conflict were—and remain—in flux. Finally, the rank-and-file thugs in President Asad's security forces, the *shabiha*, are still being recruited in large numbers, and they hail from lower income families.¹⁷

Many of these *shabiha* self-identify as 'Alawi, and sectarian affiliations have become increasingly salient to the violence of the conflict and to expressions of existential survival of "minorities." But studies of civil war have shown that ethnic or sectarian divisions rarely *cause* conflict.¹⁸ It may well be that the sectarian claim making by the Syrian regime works to keep some Syrians off the streets, particularly in Aleppo and Damascus. Putting forward images of the regime as the guarantor of this explicitly multisectionar order is nevertheless itself part of a decades-old, evolving nationalist repertoire in which fantasies of accommodation and order came to be harnessed to economic figurations of market-oriented prosperity—for wealthy neoliberals and poor regime thugs alike.¹⁹

Exploring the relative quiescence of Syria's two main cities in the first year of the uprising, before the escalation of violence made widespread peaceful protest unlikely anywhere in the country, allows us to consider

17. Yasin al-Hajj Salih, "Fi *Shabiha wa Tashbih wa Dawlathima*" *Kalamon*, no. 5 (Winter 2012), www.kalamon.org/articles-details-122#axzz2RnQoqyMd is one well-informed example of a growing number of discussions of *shabiha*.

18. See, for instance, James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War," *American Political Science Review* 97 (Feb. 2003): 75–90, and Stathis N. Kalyvas, "The Ontology of 'Political Violence': Action and Identity in Civil Wars," *Perspectives on Politics* 1 (Sept. 2003): 475–94.

19. For a discussion of the ways in which 'Alawi solidarities have congealed in the context of the uprising, while also producing new forms of differentiation among 'Alawis of the coast and interior, see Aziz Nakkash, "The Alawite Dilemma in Homs: Survival, Solidarity, and the Making of a Community," library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/09825.pdf. The article discusses in depth the fears of existential threat and commitments to the status quo. It also charts the economic incentives (including aspirations to upward mobility both prior to the uprising and in the wake of war) that have helped to establish (and, in the context of the uprising, militarized) sectarian allegiances to the regime. *Shabiha* in the interior reiterate the claims of the official discourse, that the country's very "unity" is the "target" of "armed gangs" and "terrorists" (p. 6).

more general issues of ideological uptake in the neoliberal present while also specifying neoliberalism's autocratic permutations. The vision of the good life that emerges from this blend, as we shall see, is embodied and consumed in various ways—by television stars who wholeheartedly uphold or ambivalently navigate the system, film characters who represent its fantasylike aspirations, and all manner of creative efforts to offer an alternative. But in order to understand this decade, it is helpful to return to the era immediately preceding it, in which flagrantly fictitious statements defined a rhetorical universe through which authoritarian rule was partially secured.

2. Ambiguities under the Asads

As I have argued elsewhere, "For much of [President Hafiz al-]Asad's rule (1970–2000) his image was omnipresent. In newspapers, on television, and during orchestrated spectacles, Asad was praised as the 'father,' the 'gallant knight,' even the country's 'premier pharmacist.' Yet most Syrians, including those who created the official rhetoric, did not believe its claims." Syria's cult of Hafiz al-Asad operated primarily to specify both the form and content of civic obedience. Beyond the barrel of the gun and the confines of the torture chamber, Asad's personality cult served "as a disciplinary device, generating a politics of public dissimulation in which citizens acted *as if* they revered their leader. By inundating daily life with instructive symbolism, the regime exercised a subtle, yet effective form of power. The cult worked to enforce obedience, induce complicity, isolate Syrians from one another, and set guidelines for public speech and behavior." Even when citizens kept "their ironical distance, even [when] they demonstrate[ed] that they [did] not take what they were doing seriously, they were still" doing it. They were complying. "And compliance [was] what ultimately counted politically."²⁰

Although not all of the regime's claims were as patently spurious as the ones specific to the personality cult, the official rhetoric in general, controlled by what seemed an ossifying Ba'ath party, had become remarkably wooden and outmoded as Hafiz al-Asad's rule wore on. Granted, there seemed to be pride in the elder Asad's command of foreign policy, a widespread consensus in favor of an ongoing national resistance to what were understood as genuine foreign conspiracies, and a conviction that some aspects of the welfare state needed to be maintained in spite of a gradual

20. Lisa Wedeen, "Conceptualizing Culture: Possibilities for Political Science," *APSA* 96 (Dec. 2002): 723. The notion that compliance is what counts politically is taken from Slavoj Žižek, discussed in Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago, 1999).

reduction of provisions.²¹ But these verities were themselves rendered stale and seemingly bogus, often hooked to hyperboles that made them appear absurd, as indicated in jokes, widely circulated cartoons, and even tolerated comedy skits.²²

Or, to put it differently, under the elder Asad it was easy to adduce examples of the distanced, irreverent attitude adopted by Syrians toward regime rhetoric.²³ Conditions of unbelief were widely shared and acknowledgments of involuntary compliance abundant. In that context, obedience was resecured by the regime's effort to occasion continual demonstrations of it. As Žižek has noted, external obedience, unlike good judgment or conviction or legitimacy, depends on a self-conscious submission to authority, which in Syria was often predicated on *not believing*.²⁴ Practices such as joke telling or permitted comedy skits reproduced this self-consciousness, without which a politics of as-if could hardly be sustained. Like other postrevolutionary, postcolonial countries in which Soviet-style fatigue had not yet fully given way to a younger generation's attachment to the promises of the market, the rhetorical universe of flagrantly fictitious impulses was producing a prescriptive grammar that regulated public speech and helped most people know how to stay safe.²⁵

The complexities of the present stand in contrast to this earlier period. On the one hand, the complications of the Bashar al-Asad era are registered in the more difficult-to-read public demonstrations of support in which throngs of people, seemingly independent (at least at the beginning of the uprising) of regime directive, flooded the streets wearing T-shirts of the president's face, waving flags, and honking horns. Testimonies of love for the president were, and continue to be, apparent on Facebook pages, in tweets, and on the internet sites of "*minhibbukji[s]*"—the name derived from a 2007 presidential "election" slogan designating citizens' devotion to

21. The regime announced a policy of economic pluralism (*al-ta'addudiyya al-iqtisadiyya*) in 1991, which formally acknowledged informal changes of economic liberalization already underway by 1986 when Syria began to dismantle its command economy. Those changes remained limited until 2001, when under the new leadership of Bashar al-Asad the regime began overhauling the banking system, creating new opportunities for the telecommunications sector, and expanding free-trade zones; see Haddad, *Business Networks in Syria*, p. 26. The first private banks opened in 2004, the Syrian Stocks and Financial Markets Authority was created to supervise the Damascus Securities Exchange in 2005, and "private sector interests" produced two major holding companies in 2007 (*ibid.*, p. 26). The Syrian Business Council was formed the same year, an avowedly modern business association established to keep up with innovations in commerce and technology.

22. See Wedeen, "Signs of Transgression," *Ambiguities of Domination*, pp. 87–142.

23. See *ibid.*, p. 2.

24. See Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York, 1989).

25. See *ibid.*, p. 32.

their leader. On the other hand, complexity is also apparent in the numerous user-generated creations on the web poking fun at the president (something no one dared before the uprising), cartoons comparing him to other departed dictators, the challenge to the official portrayal of events by satellite television channels such as al-Jazeera and al-'Arabiyya, and social media of all kinds calling for the regime's demise. If the earlier era of Hafiz al-Asad registered the ambiguities evident in overtly authoritarian logics of domination, the contemporary period's ambiguities suggest the intricacies of rule in a market-oriented, information-awash era in which various forms of sovereignty—both personal and collective—are threatened not only by violence but also by new forms of disorientation and uncertainty.

This uncertainty is connected to the ways in which ideology ceased in the 2000s to be the privileged domain of the party, which both regulated the content and controlled the institutional circuits of discursive dissemination. Instead, Syrian television dramas and advertising, motored by the young president's calls to reform, helped to diversify what counted as the good life. Cultivating desires for commodities, fostering new ambitions of upward mobility, and producing individual philanthropic programs championing citizen empowerment predicated on knowing its limitations—these were the sorts of disciplinary effects this market-oriented era tended to generate.²⁶ And perhaps the most dramatic example of amped-up public relations campaigns was the vigorous effort to market the president and first lady as members of a growing cosmopolitan political elite, culminating in an ill-timed March 2011 *Vogue* article.²⁷ This feature piece was pulled from the glossy magazine's website, in a move reminiscent of Soviet strategies of forgetting. (Think of the memorable scene in Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* [1979] in which a discredited comrade is air-brushed out of the picture.)

Previous attempts at consumption-oriented image management had appeared more successful than this one, including the first lady's heralded appearance in *Paris Match* in 2008 and UNESCO's designation of Damascus as the cultural capital of the Arab world that same year. Portraying the couple as modern, enlightened, reform-minded, and chic to its upper-class cronies, as well as to a broad Syrian and global constituency aspiring to glamor and luxury, these strategies did not eliminate party rallies or cultlike practices altogether, but it did relativize them.²⁸ Although the 2007

26. See Michael Burawoy, *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process under Monopoly Capitalism* (Chicago, 1979); for a contrasting view, see Adam Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy* (New York, 1985).

27. See Joan Juliet Buck, "A Rose in the Desert," *Vogue*, 1 Mar. 2011, pp. 528–33, 571.

28. Cultlike practices around the deceased president Hafiz al-Asad continued, especially in

presidential election seemed an especially blatant blast from the past, a reminder of the elder Asad's mechanisms of social control, even its demonstrations of outward allegiance were confusing in a way that rule in the 1980s and 1990s were not. The son's "election" seemed to suggest a well-spring of support and an excess of feeling—an attachment that continues to be asserted by staunch loyalists and informs the distinct ambivalence experienced by others. As we have seen with the beginning of the uprising itself, this era also produced novel occasions for transgression and resistance, hitherto unheard voices of fury, piety, and joyous camaraderie, inventive ways of staying safe, and new limits to what appears reasonable, questionable, sayable—or maybe even thinkable.

3. Neoliberalism as Ideology: Zones of Pleasure/ Zones of Protest

For the first two months of the uprising, it was not uncommon to hear citizens supportive of the regime or ambivalent about transformation in Syria's two largest cities repeating the diagnosis "rah tinhal" (it will resolve itself)—an act of wishful thinking in the present, a fantasy of repair reflecting the attitudes of people who had benefited from or imagined prospering under preuprising conditions of neoliberal reform. As I have noted elsewhere,²⁹ the term *neoliberalism* is vexed, in part because it tends to bundle together at least four distinct political-economy phenomena: (1) macroeconomic stabilization (policies that encourage low inflation and low public debt and discourage Keynesian countercyclical policies); (2) trade liberalization and financial deregulation; (3) the privatization of publicly owned assets and firms; and (4) welfare-state retrenchment. Sometimes these four aspects work in concert, but often they do not, and their impact on population welfare varies.³⁰ Scholars who have unpacked the term have

the army where hagiographic images were circulated and excerpts from his speeches were read aloud routinely—and to a lesser extent (and with less discipline) in schools.

29. See Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions: Publics, Power, and Performance in Yemen* (Chicago, 2008), p. 187.

30. For example, in Latin America, the imposition of macroeconomic stabilization policies seems to have benefitted the poor, who had experienced a dramatic erosion of their meager salaries and savings during the hyperinflation crisis of the 1980s. The literature on neoliberalism and on the related phenomena of globalization is simply too vast to do it justice here. For a key volume on the local and translocal dimensions of neoliberalism, see Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism* (Durham, N.C., 2001). A recent anthropological study that grapples productively with social and political theory literatures on neoliberalism, abandonment, and exhaustion in "late liberalism" is Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (Durham, N.C., 2011). Fewer works are devoted to the seductions of neoliberalism for those

captured important variations, not only among countries but also within them.³¹ In Syria, for example, economic liberalization was “circumscribed” until 2005³² when new kinds of “economic governance” emerged in response to dwindling oil and gas reserves;³³ many citizens never fully abandoned moral commitments or a sense of entitlement to some version of welfare-state subsidization; and some sectors of the economy were more vulnerable to both market competition and new opportunities for regime-business collusion than others.³⁴ Focusing exclusively on the divergences among neoliberal regimes, however, forecloses consideration of the neoliberal order as a distinct ideological project, one with specific capacities to enlist citizens into novel forms of regulation, intervention, and protest in the service of what Foucault calls “a general art of government.”³⁵

who are rightly critical of it, the affective investments in this version of the good life despite its cruelties. Much of the literature on globalization and neoliberalism overlaps or discusses similar phenomena, such as the growth of international trade, the proliferation of financial flows and instruments, and the integration of nation-states previously understood as more autonomous or bounded; see Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton, N.J., 2001) and *Globalization and Its Discontents: Essays on the New Mobilization of People and Money* (New York, 1998).

In sorting out these arguments, helpful basic studies include David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005), and Robert Gilpin, *The Challenge of Global Capitalism: The World Economy in the Twenty-First Century* (2002). Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914–1991* (New York, 1994) permitted me to grasp the importance of the breakdown of Bretton Woods in the 1970s. Michael C. Dawson *Not in Our Lifetimes: The Future of Black Politics* (Chicago, 2011) chronicles the effects of neoliberalism on race, inequality, and ideological reorientations in the US. I am grateful to him and to earlier conversations with Carles Boix.

31. Syria’s Deputy Prime Minister of Economic Affairs ‘Abd Allah Dardari termed this economic liberalization *social market* reform. For an overview of some of the literature on Syria’s economy under Bashar al-Asad, and in particular Dardari’s influence, see Shana Marshall, “Syria and the Financial Crisis: Prospects for Reform?” www.mepc.org/journal/middle-east-policy-archives/syria-and-financial-crisis-prospects-reform; Haddad, “The Formation and Development of Economic Networks in Syria: Implications for Economic and Fiscal Reforms, 1986–2000,” in *Networks of Privilege in the Middle East*, pp. 37–76 and his more recent *Business Networks in Syria*; and Muhammad Jamal Barut, *al-‘Aqd al-akhir fi tarikhi suriyya, jadaliyya al-jumud wa al-islam* (Doha, 2012).

32. See Haddad, *Business Networks in Syria*, especially the latter chapters (4, 5, 6, and the conclusion).

33. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

34. The president’s cousin Rami Makhlef has the nickname “Mr. 5 Percent,” speaking to his alleged penchant for skimming 5 percent, if not more, off the top of every investment deal made in Syria. Some people, perhaps more accurately, call him “Mr. 60 Percent.”

35. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979* (New York, 2010). For cogent efforts to understand neoliberalism as a process, as “neoliberalization,” see Neil Brenner, Jamie Peck, and Nik Theodore’s jointly authored works, especially “After Neoliberalization?” *Globalizations* 7 (Sept. 2010): 327–45.

In this spirit, let us think of neoliberal ideology as one in which everyday practices, scholarly works, official policies, and countless other expressions invoke the language of efficiency, consumer choice, conspicuous consumption, cost-benefit calculations, and personal initiative in ways that mark a shift in riskbearing away from governments and corporations onto individuals and families. This definition articulates the various political economy aspects of the phenomena noted above—the privatization of assets previously public, financialization and deregulation, and welfare-state retrenchment. If this is an acceptable characterization, we can consider how this market logic operates in practice, not only to produce “zones of social abandonment”³⁶ and disaffection as familiar safety nets disappear or are revamped in the context of growing inequality and the importation of luxury goods, but also to organize new enclaves of wealth, forms of sociability, affective connection, optimism, and pleasure. Thinking of neoliberalism as an ideology with its own techniques of governance and norms of success and failure raises the issue, not only of contemporary forms of exploitation and precarious living, but also of the reasons for perduring affective investments and ambivalence, specifically among those who had derived pleasure from, or could imagine future possibilities in, new types of prosperity, sociability, and consumerism—the worlds of downtown Damascus and Aleppo, what advertisers call the A⁺, A, and A⁻ neighborhoods of these cities.

Until the protests began in March 2011, the operative contrast taken to summarize the period seemed to be between the Damascus of plentiful restaurants and boutique hotels in the 2000s and the ascetic, drab capital of the 1980s and early 1990s. In the “new Damascus,” to modify Christa Salamandra’s term,³⁷ the breadlines in the poor areas during the last decade and a half were shorter than they had been in the 1980s, and, in prosperous neighborhoods, there were numerous new croissant bakeries. “Even Hafiz al-Asad did not have bananas at home” during the lean years of food shortage, or so urban legends claim—an example that became a familiar refrain among Damascenes from diverse social classes in their efforts to capture what had changed under Bashar. According to this narrative, what had changed were, not only the availability of bananas, but also the value placed on doing without them in times of scarcity.

Affluent and middle-class residents in both big cities, many armed with computers and iPhones, whiled away their evenings smoking water pipes

36. See João Biehl, *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment* (Berkeley, 2005).

37. See Christa Salamandra, *A New Old Damascus: Authenticity and Distinction in Urban Syria* (Bloomington, Ind., 2004).

(available also for home delivery) and chatting without the palpable fear once felt during the rule of Hafiz al-Asad. Citizens in the 2000s could even mention the young president's name in public without anxiety. New forms of social life were brought into being by young people who found no contradiction in performing bike stunts to expletive-peppered hip-hop lyrics in front of the Umayyad mosque. The scarce coffee houses previously frequented by old men with endless time for backgammon gave way to new cafés serving Starbucks-like beverages to a bustling multigenerational clientele—what Damascenes themselves now refer to as the birth of a café culture. Whereas few in the early 1990s would have walked in large parts of the old city at night for fear of being nourishment for Damascus's robust rats, the historic district of 2010 boasted beautifully renovated Ottoman dwellings, housing bars, clubs, and restaurants that, until the uprising, attracted locals and tourists in the thousands. Aleppo's old Christian quarter similarly became a site of renovated restaurants and boutique hotels, while a luxurious Sheraton near the grand mosque accommodated a growing, globally oriented business clientele.

The emergence of protests and regime reactions to unrest in March could be read as expressing the divide between haves and have-nots, but the actual contours of resistance complicate any merely economic picture of the good life. Demonstrations illuminated the specific instantiations of neoliberalism in the context of ongoing disagreements about the value of order, the nature of citizen obligation, the importance of piety, the dangers of communal affiliations, and leaders' commitments to authoritarian control. There were small demonstrations in the weeks leading up to the March protests and one of fifteen hundred people near the main marketplace of the capital protesting a policeman's ill treatment of a local shopkeeper. But the "Arab Spring" got underway and gained considerable momentum in Syria only after 15 March.

Inspired by events in Tunisia, Yemen, Libya, and Egypt, the initial focal point for large-scale Syrian protest was the brutal treatment of fifteen school children in the small southern town of Dar'a. This event was itself preceded by the arrest of two women from the town in January, one of whom had allegedly been overheard discussing Hosni Mubarak's overthrow on the phone, openly musing whether the Syrian regime would be next. The two women's arrest seems to have motivated students, ranging from ten to fifteen years old, including the two women's own children, to write antiregime graffiti on school walls. This event became a transformative moment in large part because of the regime's reaction. Security forces arrested fifteen of the students, and, in response, "a small number of angry protestors marched on the governor's mansion after Friday prayers on

March 11 to call for the children's release."³⁸ One week later, four people were killed when security forces opened fire on a large crowd proceeding from Dar'a's main mosque after noon prayers. An escalating cycle of protests and brutal crackdowns engaged citizens from neighboring villages and, by 25 March, other regions of Syria, including the third largest city of Homs, the coastal town of Lataqiyya, the identifiably pious area of Idlib, and drought-stricken al-Hasaka and Dayr al-Zur. Later there were mass protests in Syria's fourth largest city, Hama', a central site of the regime's war against Islamic opposition in the early 1980s (the other key area in the 1980s, significantly, being Aleppo) and of the famous massacre of 1982.

Outrage over disclosures that the Dar'a children were being tortured in prison, over the disrespect shown to elders attempting to negotiate their release, and over the sheer lack of accountability of regime officials linked to the ruling family responsible for the children's treatment tapped into a reservoir of dissatisfaction with official corruption, authoritarian caprice, ongoing brutality, and the government's inattentiveness to suffering. "With spirit, with blood, we sacrifice for you, ya Dar'a" (*bi ruh, bi dam, nafdik ya Dar'a*) played on the regime's slogan of sacrifice for Syria's leader (*bi ruh, bi dam, nafdik ya Bashshar*), voicing the national "we" as a commitment to the town where children had first been emboldened to violate the norms of regime-sanctioned behavior. The errant pupils became a locus for new political intensities in which acts of collective citizenship coalesced around resisting tyranny and disrupting the status quo.³⁹

In what became a battle to represent the future in the present, members of the professional-managerial class enmeshed in regime politics registered their fears of displacement by the children—of losing autocratic control and privileges, of no longer standing in for the exemplary public or producing the mimetic guidelines for an aspirational Syria pinned to orderly, modern progress. Thus, the regime not only attempted to crush the resistance by force but also was able to marshal its apparatus of cultural production in the service of maintaining its rule. Radio programs devoted to lifestyle and the importance of applying mascara correctly gave way to elaborate talk shows and street interviews in which it was initially denied that protests were going on, even as they were simultaneously situated in terms of orchestrated machinations by foreign governments, often with vocal accusations that America was "at the heart of the conspiracy." Fa-

38. Leenders, "'Oh Buthaina, oh Sha'ban—the Hawrani Is Not Hungry, We Want Freedom!'" p. 4.

39. The children were ultimately released. As violence escalated, other citizens, including some children, became iconic figures (for the opposition) of a dissenting public's vulnerability and regime cruelty.

mous Syrian actors were enlisted for countless television appearances in which important disagreements were overridden by concerns for regime stability, coupled with demands for public displays of loyalty. The well-known actor Basim Yakhur, for example, looking frustrated with his colleagues during a televised roundtable discussion about scriptwriter Rima Flayhan's humanitarian petition, chastised his colleagues for focusing on such an insular issue instead of on politics. By politics, he meant the ways in which the demonstrations had been "orchestrated" (*madrus*) from the start by foreign powers.⁴⁰ The petition had incited considerable debate and a number of threats from both top regime officials and production companies. In McCarthy-like fashion, signatories were warned that if they did not remove their names they would no longer be able to work in Syrian drama. This was a petition appealing to the regime to allow provisions for children in the besieged area of Dar'a. Flayhan and others who lent their names to the document became part of a real-life drama in which livelihoods were threatened, cleavages made public, and retractions demanded.

For Syrians who identified with the need for political reforms but stopped short of condemning the regime outright, the petition exaggerated the situation. According to these folks, some of whom had visited Dar'a after the regime's attack on the area, basic goods were being allowed in, and children were not going without milk.⁴¹ To be sure, they conceded, some residents might be distrustful of the regime and unwilling to pick up emergency supplies the army distributed. Given the unrest, however, these prominent Syrians had no issue with the army's being there as such. Indeed, the famous actor Durayd Lahham defended the army's presence so fulsomely in public it prompted al-Jazeera to produce a short segment contrasting his current political stance with the one represented in the clownlike but courageous political statements of his character Ghawwar al-Tushi in the plays and films that had made him so beloved decades before.⁴²

As noted in part two, official rhetoric under Bashar al-Asad had never fully abandoned the practices reminiscent of the old regime under Hafiz al-Asad, producing guidelines for public speech and action, enforcing obedience, and inducing complicity in part by continually generating patently

40. www.youtube.com/watch?v=fhfmgn4kH8k

41. Interview with artists self-identified as reformists, many of whom were subsequently seen by opposition members as supportive of the regime, by the author, Mar., Apr., and May 2011.

42. www.youtube.com/watch?v=fhfmgn4kH8k; the feature covers a number of actors' pro-regime positions, but the jump cut from the character Ghawwar al-Tushi's memorable calls for "dignity" (the same word used by Syrian protestors) to Durayd Lahham's defense of the army's role in establishing peace on Syrian streets drew especial attention.

spurious statements. Only this time, Syrian television stars were put on the spot. Many of them registered views of outright support and love for the president, perhaps payback for their access to the good life in an era in which Bashar al-Asad cultivated his own celebrity status by acknowledging and bankrolling theirs. Famous television personalities carving out what they identified as a middle ground were chastised by opposition and pro-regime loyalists alike. (The middle-ground group issued two statements in the early days of the uprising, the second one a quasi-retraction of the first in which signatories' support for reforms pursued in moderation was tempered by declarations of fidelity to the president.)

Despite this discursive ruckus, and perhaps because of it, truth and falsity have been more difficult to discern in the Bashar al-Asad era. This uncertainty is in part a result of the ways in which even the official rhetoric's modes of operation have diversified significantly and become more sophisticated, beholden to new technologies of dissemination and communities of argument (such as those provided by the internet), to popular entertainers in the highly successful pan-Arab industry of Syrian television, to the "captains of consciousness" who produce commercial advertising—in short, to the forms of market-oriented language that bespeak the potent and supple alliance between capital and the regime.⁴³ This collaboration between political and economic elites was already apparent in the novel forms of sociability hinted at above—in the production of a new middle class in the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, whose hopes for the good life bound it to regime politics as usual.⁴⁴ Many affluent citizens of Damascus and Aleppo aspiring toward neoliberal standards of success seemed content to forego political freedoms in exchange for the expanded social freedoms and economic opportunities generated by market openings and by the regime's commitment to a secular vision of prosperity.⁴⁵

This vision is dramatized in *Marra Ukhra* (Once Again; dir. Jud Sa'ïd, 2009), a Syrian film whose importance is illustratively ethnographic rather than cinematic.⁴⁶ Centered on a love affair between a Lebanese Christian woman and a Syrian Muslim man, both children of the war years in Lebanon, the film chronicles the life of a military officer posted in Lebanon

43. See Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture* (New York, 1976).

44. For details, see Haddad, *Business Networks in Syria*.

45. This is not to argue that all members of minorities (such as Christian communities or 'Alawi ones) identify with the regime or are prosperous.

46. Interviews with Syrian directors whom the author wishes to keep anonymous, Apr. 2010, Oct. 2010, and Jan 2012. These directors were overwhelmingly negative about the film.

and the obscure circumstances of his death.⁴⁷ (The officer portrayed in the film is the father of the director of the film.) But what is noteworthy for our purposes is the film's celebration of upward mobility and unbounded wealth. Championing the alliance between finance capital (the lovers, including a jilted third party, all work in a bank) and neoliberal autocracy, the film offers up a fantasy of the good life made possible by generational change.

The male protagonist lives in a deluxe apartment, overlooking all of Damascus and equipped with the latest gadgets—including a large flat-screen television, video game equipment, and, most importantly, surveillance devices with which he monitors internet and Skype conversations. Public surveillance in the film has become privatized in typical neoliberal fashion, internalized and, in effect, outsourced to the *nouveau riche*. Majd, Jud Sai'id's alter ego and the main protagonist, voluntarily and without any directive from on high, spies on others, evidently in response to a need to maintain control. He is a damaged soul, but one capable of redemption through a love that also sutures the wounds of war in a new collaborative, post-Syrian-occupation era. Syrians and Lebanese can work together, even love, across sectarian, historical, and regional divides. When Israel attacks Lebanon "once again," Majd's love object, Joyce, forgives him for spying on her, and it is through his connections and expertise that she is able to return home. The final scene is uncharacteristically heavy-handed, showing the two lovers together on a suspension bridge linking Syria to Lebanon.

In general, though, the film's spare reportage is at odds with the hagiographic imagery and inflated language of the Hafiz al-Asad era. Even the Israeli invasion of 2006 is noted flatly. But what truly distinguishes the film is its relentless attention to lifestyle—its portrayal of the sophisticated well-to-do as connoisseurs of wine, whiskey, and fast cars who live in an ideologically neutral era devoid of class conflict and shot through with market openings, inflected by generational difference. Unlike the father who "can't handle the new world" and understands his "time has passed," the son literally wakes up (our hero also spent some years in a coma) to an altered political climate in which military status has been displaced by purchasing power. Majd is part of a younger, wildly successful generation able to produce unprecedented wealth and consume it ostentatiously in a world where glamorous pool parties and country hunting excursions are the depicted norm. Majd also enjoys connections to high-ranking mem-

47. Thanks are owed to Rasha Salti for conversations about this film and its relationship to regime official Ghazzi Kan'an's purported suicide.

bers of the old guard—officers from a previous era who have survived to embody the current marriage of finance capital and military might. Their careers enabled a transition to the regime-run banking sector, a sector that also welcomes the business-oriented, risk-seeking men (like Majd) of a younger generation.

The fantasies on display in this film present in particularly stark terms a version of neoliberal accommodation with autocracy, one that seems to endorse the coalescence of class, political, and consumer inequalities or ignores them in a way that reform-minded Syrian television directors, even those who long for order, would not. Yet the film dramatizes more subtle and ambivalent renderings of the way in which ideological interpellation operates in the present, the various forms and intensities characteristic of the professional-managerial class's investments—in a nostalgia for a lost but memorable sense of security, in the experience of social freedom, in a commitment to a multicultural secularism that protects minorities, in the *joie de vivre* fostered by market openings, even in the promise of reforms endlessly deferred. Affective investments are related to material enticements, not only for those who can afford them, but also for those who cannot yet are persuaded to identify with a consumer-oriented mirage of pleasure and status. (The high school and college students with whom I worked, for example, despite divergent backgrounds and radically different ambitions—career aspirations ranging from yoga instructor to civil society activist to policeman and entrepreneur—nevertheless shared a common desire for fast cars.)

Market liberalization also structures the terms in which some of the grievances and alternatives are put forth. On the one hand, this makes a visionary oppositional politics or alternative to market-oriented capitalism difficult to imagine. On the other, the alliance between consumer/advertising-oriented capital and the state, unlike aspects of industrial or military capital, is endangered by the harm being done by the regime to its own citizen-customers. The regime's penchant for defining enemies in such broad terms and its failure to govern in ways that ensure or even enable popular aspirations for the good life may help to explain why some consumer-citizens in Aleppo and Damascus began to register their moral outrage politically in growing (but still relatively small) numbers between May and July 2012—before violence from all sides made the two cities part of what some describe as a "living hell."⁴⁸

Public expressions of moral outrage from populations that had previously remained aloof suggest the limits of ideological reproduction and

48. Interviews with Syrians escaping the violence by author, Aug. 2012, Beirut.

direct our attention toward possibilities for innovation. The collective cartoons produced by residents in Kafr Nubbul, a hamlet known to few before the uprising, is one example among multiple efforts to offer an aesthetic, witty accounting of politics. Disseminated across the country (and via social media throughout the world), these creative, irony-laden drawings continue to generate commentary and a new sense of publicness, shared pleasure, and pride even as violence overwhelms—the laughter making bearable brutality’s banality, a theme to which we shall return. Early on, the widely publicized speeches of the outspoken Muslim cleric Shaykh Krayim Rajih, linking freedom to economic well-being, demonstrated how quotidian experiences of economic inequality undermined neoliberal autocracy’s promises of the good life.⁴⁹ For him, citizens already exhausted by making ends meet were simultaneously caught up in the generalized fear and arbitrariness associated with authoritarian rule: “Today people pay the price of electricity, I mean electricity and a mobile phone, of 10,000 to 12,000 lira, and their salary of 6,000 isn’t enough for anything. And these words, I spoke them face to face with the president. We don’t want anything. We want to live, we want freedom, we want dignity. That the people feel like they can sleep without fear in their hearts.” Rajih offers an account of everyday life that documents aspects of violence under autocracy, such as attacks on worshippers leaving the mosque. But he also invokes some of the more general, crueller effects of market liberalization and holds the state responsible for their redress, an appeal that both guarantees and seems to be part of what freedom actually means.⁵⁰

Popular appeals (of which his remains an exemplary instance) suggest that Syria is a far cry from the “spiritualized hedonism” that Žižek identifies with the contemporary West (or that Sa’id’s film endorses).⁵¹ Narratives of social justice are in circulation, some explicitly tied to Islam and some to the regime’s own secular modernization narratives of progress and backwardness. Yet, although the majority of citizens may not be bought off in the way philosophers such as Žižek sometimes suggest, it cannot be said that the protests (or armed resistance for that matter) offer a coherent political program for a nonneoliberal future. The protests themselves may beckon people over time to see the realities that have always been right before their eyes. Through political protest, citizens may

49. www.youtube.com/watch?v=nUPLiy1B59s&feature=related

50. Ibid. See also www.youtube.com/watch?v=L17cYVbOKe0, and www.alitthead.tv/videos/1353/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%AE-%D9%85%D8. Interestingly, since Krayim Rajih’s departure from Syria, his speeches have become overtly sectarian in character. See especially his sermon of 4 Jan. 2012.

51. “Talk to Al Jazeera—Slavoj Žižek,” www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Qhk8az8K-Y

discover the freedom they demand by enacting it, producing sustained visions grappling with forces of reproduction while transforming moments of spontaneous action into ongoing possibilities for politics.⁵²

At this point, opposition remains fragmented, however, while violence escalates. Divisions are in part due to systematic efforts to kill politics in the decades leading up to the uprisings—and to worries about nonsovereignty and about being out of control.⁵³ The regime has capitalized on these anxieties—sectarian strife, Iraq War-like conditions, the possibilities of partition, and the problems of neighboring Lebanon’s decades-long conflict—arguably helping to produce the very vulnerabilities that then, in principle, require the state’s protection.⁵⁴ The regime’s attempts have certainly contributed to creating localized impasses, the tendency to voice concerns in for-or-against declarations, and now violence of world-shattering proportions. The demonstrators have a target in mind when they call for the president’s departure or his execution. And in this sense the protests have already been politically significant, challenging the self-evidence of his popularity and the right of a family of autocrats to rule indefinitely. This is what Alain Badiou calls “negative power”—the power to “make them go away.”⁵⁵ However, a bona fide political program has yet to be articulated, even in places where protestors have numbered in the hundreds of thousands. Despite Syrian specificities (that is, an excess of coercion and the slowness of a unified opposition to congeal), this absence also speaks to a global phenomenon, one as evident in New York as in Damascus. The neoliberal era—in its autocratic and nominally democratic versions—does not simply economize “spheres and activities heretofore governed by other orders of value,”⁵⁶ for it does this unevenly and

52. Protestors include adherents of banned political parties (such as communists, Nasirists, socialists, and members of the Muslim Brotherhood), dissident intellectuals, Islamic activists who are unaffiliated with conventional parties, and young people of various political stripes who see their employment opportunities being diminished and their hopes of achieving the good life dashed; see Omar S. Dahi, “A Syrian Drama: A Taxonomy of a Revolution,” *Syria Comment*, 13 Aug. 2011, www.joshualandis.com/blog/a-syrian-drama-a-taxonomy-of-a-revolution-by-omar-dahi/

53. I am indebted to Berlant here.

54. See *Kalamon*, no. 5 (Winter 2012), www.kalamon.org/articles-details-122#axzz2RnQoqyMd

55. Quoted in Jonathon Collerson, “Alain Badiou on Tunisia, Riots, and Revolution,” wrongarithmic.wordpress.com/2011/02/02/alain-badiou-on-tunisia-riots-revolution/

56. Wendy Brown, “Sacrificial Citizenship: Neoliberalism, De-Democratization, Austerity Politics,” p. 2; paper delivered at the University of Chicago, Jan. 2013. See also Koray Çalişkan and Michel Callon, “Economization, Part 1: Shifting Attention from the Economy Towards Processes of Economization,” *Economy and Society* 38 (Aug. 2009): 369–98; and Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley, 2002) and *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (New York, 2011).

without the ubiquity sometimes attributed to it.⁵⁷ Rather, what makes neoliberalism or at least the neoliberal epoch distinctive ideologically is that it has failed to produce an alternative to market-oriented capitalism.

4. Laughter in Autocracy

In the dark times
Will there also be singing?
Yes, there will also be singing.
About the dark times.⁵⁸

Comedy is not singing, and “the dark times” Bertolt Brecht references are not the specific forms of darkness noted here. Syria’s dark times include the alliance between consumer capital and regime autocracy in the neoliberal era; the absence of an alternative program to market-oriented capitalism even when the market has ceased to do its instrumentalizing work;⁵⁹ and, as the country descends into a devastatingly bloody war, the fading of the long-standing ideal of multicultural accommodation. Brecht’s riposte nevertheless reminds us that dire conditions not only fail to stymie creativity but also provide the material that inspires it. His wit here is suggestive of the ways in which comedy and laughter can enable and enact an estrangement from the established order (in Syria’s case, from neoliberal autocracy), allowing for penetrating diagnoses and, sometimes, political openings.

In the encounter between two seemingly contradictory saturating logics, the neoliberal and the autocratic, the comedic series *A Forgotten Village* (2008; 2010) arguably best exemplifies their reconciliation, situating the desire for unfreedom in the rural backwardness of citizens unaccustomed to the urbanity of the good life. But the series’ richness derives from its complex ambivalences towards the objects of its critique, and the over-the-top aspects of the series can be seen in this context to operate as a particularly in-your-face exaggeration of ordinary realities—a way of drawing attention to citizens’ habituation to them.

The series is the most celebrated comedic work of Allayth Hajju, one of Syria’s best-known television directors whose wide-ranging contributions to Syrian drama include the path-breaking comedy sketches of *Buq‘a Daw’*

57. See Brown’s acknowledgement of this ubiquity and differentiation in “Sacrificial Citizenship,” p. 2. Her paper nevertheless continues to discuss neoliberalism as if it were more totalizing and evenly saturating than it is.

58. Bertolt Brecht, “Motto,” trans. John Willett, *Poems, 1913–1956*, trans. Edith Anderson, et al. (New York, 1987), p. 320.

59. See Berlant’s discussion of David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley, 2000) in “Slow Death”; see also p. 779 of that essay.

(Spotlight), which launched his directorial career in 2001. Hailed as one of the most talented among a new generation of edgy, experimentally inclined directors, Hajju went on to produce the caustic, darkly humorous sketches of *Hope—There Isn't Any* (2004) before embarking on two seasons of the enormously popular *A Forgotten Village* with the comedic screenwriter Mamduh Hamada. Hajju's comedies lay bare the tensions between the disciplinary and emancipatory possibilities of comedy; humor can work to shore up a regime's ideology, even as it raises the potential for world-creating openings by pointing out everyday life's absurdities to viewers. Neither necessarily a vehicle for collective, therapeutic mobilization—a successful effort to counter what Walter Benjamin called the “beastly seriousness”⁶⁰ of ongoing oppression—nor a means of coping with, as Theodor Adorno wrote, “fear by defecting to the forces that are to be feared,”⁶¹ *A Forgotten Village* is at once a means to help people cope with their present and an invitation to free them from it.⁶² The serial's richness turns on its capacity to operate as a vehicle or laboratory for oppositional ideologies as well as a way to reproduce the attitudes central to politics as usual.

Set in a fictional hamlet on the northwestern coast of Syria, *A Forgotten Village* uses the levity of slapstick to tackle issues of everyday corruption, regime capriciousness, poverty, and the incongruities of political rhetoric in dark times. Parodying the regime, citizens, and the mechanisms of social control that enmesh both, the series pokes fun at authoritarian circumstances and locates political stasis in the rural hinterland—a world that at times seems to offer a specific critique of rural folk and at times stands in for backwardness more generally. Take, for example, the episode “In the Pitch-Dark of Night the Full Moon Is Missed” (2010), inspired by the ironic appropriation of a poem on the theme that we only appreciate what we have once it is gone.⁶³ A familiar trope of pining for loves lost is perversely grafted onto a story in which the local snitch's departure from the village triggers an unexpected appreciation of the service he provided and, ultimately, a collective longing for his return. The episode documents the ways in which information, fear, and the social expectations around each work to reproduce the conditions of authoritarian rule in a context where

60. Quoted in Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Sigfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley, 2012), p. 181.

61. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 168.

62. Thanks are owed to Bill Brown for his suggestion that I look at Miriam Hansen's discussion of the exchange between Benjamin and Adorno on Mickey Mouse.

63. See www.sobe3.com/vb/showthread.php?t=18596. Thanks are owed to Allayth Hajju for this reference.

everyone wears blinders or, to keep with the title's metaphor, operates in the dark. The first part has the village informer, who is offended by the way he is being treated after his report is leaked, leave the hamlet—requiring the police to search for a substitute among the hamlet's inhabitants. The second part registers the anxiety villagers experience when the known government snitch has departed, and no one can be sure that his replacement is not already working among them—a friend, spouse, or neighbor. All publicly claim to have refused the job, but no one can be sure that anyone else is telling the truth. The third part chronicles the villagers' solution to their own anxiety; they opt for the certainty of a coercion they know over the unbearable uncertainty of not being able to locate it reliably by deciding to find the snitch and bring him back into service. If Jean Genet's chief of police was the only one who didn't know that everyone knew he was wearing a toupee, here the situation is reversed:⁶⁴ it is the police who know that no one knows that each has refused the role. Citizens' lack of confidence in one another's goodness cancels out the possibility of any more promising form of collective action than opting for a solution that maintains the status quo. Even the anxiety of waiting for the snitch to return becomes too much to bear, so the villagers collaborate with the police, each agreeing to share the duty of informer in a publicly posted schedule. The decision further mocks the role's conventional secrecy and a citizen's incapacity to do more than reconstitute her or his own unfreedom.

On the one hand, then, this is a grim story, which, by making viewers feel hopeless, may very well participate in the conditions of oppression it brings to our attention. On the other hand, comedy, in its world-building dimensions, draws out the hypotheticals branching out in all directions. This is not to romanticize permitted comedy skits. Nor is it to deny how they might operate as safety valves, providing both citizens and officials relief from the dreariness of prevailing conditions. But it is to stress comedy's ability to dramatize what we already know but may not be recognizing, thereby inviting us to detach from aspects of ordinary life that no longer do affirming work for us.⁶⁵ It is this sensibility that helped motivate calls first for reform and then for the toppling of the regime—and *did so among members of the very population that Hajju's comedy suggests were incapable of this detachment*, those supposedly forgotten populations less taken in by the neoliberal good life.

At once a stabilizing form and an opening to alternative visions, com-

64. See Jean Genet, *The Balcony*, trans. Bernard Frechtman, Kindle ed. (New York, 1966).

65. I am grateful to Berlant for our ongoing conversations on comedy and world-affirming practices and for her specific insights in *Cruel Optimism*.

edy's popular appeal should be understood in the context of historical transformations in Syrian comedy and the implications these have for politics. I have written about Syrian comedy in the 1970s through the 1990s elsewhere.⁶⁶ Suffice it to say here that the beloved figure of Ghawwar al-Tushi, the clownlike figure played by Durayd Lahham in the 1970s and 1980s, is both an ordinary citizen and someone who can eloquently speak truth to power. In the early 2000s, Mr. Hajju's experimental sketches in *Spotlight* re-created this jester figure in some of the characters played by Ayman Rida. But by 2008–2010, *A Forgotten Village* marks a shift away from this comedic strategy. Unlike the common man who mocks the government and demands that citizens be treated with dignity, the people of *A Forgotten Village* are in no way exterior to the conditions oppressing them. They are simply not estranged in the way that Ghawwar is. In this later work, the writer and the director speak truth to power, enjoying the critical distance that makes analysis possible.

It would be a mistake to exaggerate the extent of this change, however. In earlier comedies, the dialogue also suggests that the not-so-powerful people contribute to the system by being habituated to it; they empower the powerful through their complacency and despair. But in contemporary comedies we find few lines of the sort that used to characterize Ghawwar's realizations, lines with which the ordinary citizen acknowledges his own participation in the violence of which he is also a victim. In *A Forgotten Village*, by contrast, the villagers are often good-hearted citizens who know some aspects of right from wrong, but they no longer have that narrative capacity to reflect on the broader conditions or microdynamics of their oppression. The show is in part a class fantasy rooted in neoliberal autocracy's positioning of the professional-managerial elite (in this case the omniscient narrators as opposed to the characters) as harbingers of a slow but steady progress—one that celebrates modernity by contrasting it to the naïve, country bumpkinlike efforts of the villagers. The villagers here even devise creative ways to *reestablish* existing power relationships when those become unsettled and their absence too anxiety inducing. Earlier series identified the powerful as responsible and ordinary citizens as victims, but the powerful were also made so by a system that both supporters and victims upheld. *A Forgotten Village* carries traces of this sensibility. But here both ruler and ruled have become buffoons, and the critique of the regime is matched by a diagnosis that situates “the people” at the heart of the problem.

This point is most elegantly made in an episode called “Tamaluq”

66. See Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*.

(2010)—which means excessive flattery, fawning, sycophantic behavior, the practice of sucking up. An order comes from on high that the villagers are no longer allowed to suck up to officials, which leaves folks completely at a loss. Few even understand the order, and most who do are too afraid to abandon their previous practices and express themselves freely. Made anxious by a policy requiring an embrace of unfamiliar ways of being, the villagers are more successful in ceasing to flatter than they are at expressing their opinions freely. As in Hajju and Hamada's episode about the snitch, the villagers ultimately come up with an ingenious solution that manages their anxiety, although at the cost of reproducing their oppression: they turn themselves in when they cannot obey the injunction to speak their minds, thereby choosing the safe confines of the jail cell over the uncertainties of an outside world made newly treacherous. An incisive chronicle of citizens' habituation to the sycophantic fictions that sustain autocratic rule, the episode raises important questions: about the nature and burdens of free speech, the atmosphere of distrust autocracies generate over time, the arbitrariness and absurdities of orders from on high, and ordinary people's coping mechanisms—(rural) citizens' own attachments to compromised positions that undermine rather than enhance possibilities for rewarding lives.⁶⁷

If the edgiest television series are placing responsibility for current problems—of corruption, fear, surveillance, corporal abuse, and rhetorical excess—onto both rulers and ruled, it is left to the dark humor of the uncensored internet (fueled by members of a growing opposition) to broadcast parodies of regime discourses in ways that offer up a more overtly trenchant critique of the regime and rescue or romanticize (depending on your view) the people. In one video making the rounds on Facebook and other social networking sites from late June through early August of 2011, three masked men wield crutches and sticks as if they were guns. Garlands of okra are strung around their necks and torsos to mimic a string of bullets. One man tosses a baby-eggplant hand grenade and another has a couple of them strung around his neck. Making fun of the regime's claims that protestors are armed thugs engaged in violent insurrection, the video uses rhetoric from one of the president's speeches to insist on the gap between official discourse about the protest and what the protestors are actually engaged in doing: "These are the infiltrators and germs that Bashar al-Asad says are terrorist gangs," says a man pretending to be a reporter for Syrian television. "What's that? You'll liberate the

67. See Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.

country with okra?” he asks.⁶⁸ Recent internet comedies have tended to avoid poking fun at regime assertions of violent resistance, as the opposition has so clearly become armed and the country has descended into war. But clever remixes of the president’s speeches and fast-paced parodies of regime thugs’ machismo demonstrate ongoing cultural creativity unbound from the regime’s censors. Some of these parodies are explicitly beholden to Hajju’s previous work. Few have the layers of subtlety or register the nuances of ambivalence that make Hajju’s work more substantial than much of the bold ephemera currently offered.⁶⁹ The amateurish skits supporting the revolution called “huriyya wa bas” (Freedom or Nothing), sponsored by the opposition-identified UAE television channel Orient are directly drawn from Hajju’s short skits *Amal-Ma Fi* (Hope—There Isn’t Any), a title that admittedly seems anything but ambivalent. But even here the two-minute sketches are rich and polyvalent—open to revolutionary readings (and appropriations) catering to a hopelessness that not only broadcasts the characters’ “stuckness” but also seems cynically related to it.⁷⁰

To some extent the juxtapositions in comic orientations between the daring but tolerated comedies of Syrian drama and efforts on the internet poking fun at the regime and rehabilitating ordinary citizens speak to an underlying tension in Syrian politics. Syrians evaluating current events tend to cleave along the lines of two contrasting assumptions about the people: one position insists that the people are capable of political free-

68. www.youtube.com/watch?v=kPQfSMqYRKw&feature=player_embedded#

69. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=QVUTaOqNWnA. The “The Strong Heroes of Moscow” video is an important exception, dealt with at length in my book, in preparation. Like Stephen Colbert’s parody of right-wing punditry in the US, “The Strong Heroes of Moscow” is ironic without being ambivalent. And, like Colbert’s show, such efforts also risk being misunderstood—resigned in a context that enables, in this case, a group of *shabiha* to misread repugnance as praise. Although the video is a parody of male virility and authoritarian control, according to some rumors regime thugs appropriated the song without understanding its mockery of autocracy; some even reportedly used the ditty as a ringtone for their mobile phones. Irony operates through an indirection that can also be misdirected—and is no less humorous for these misfirings. But more important than the resignificatory potentialities, this clip is important because its aesthetically pleasing humor evolves into horror, preventing viewers from simply enjoying their laughter as a mode of complacency or even Benjaminian cathartic therapy. If humor runs the risk of preventing the “subject from recognizing him- or herself as the actual object of mutilation,” as Hansen reads Adorno as arguing, then this clip operates like a prophylactic, allowing us to have our enjoyment while insisting on its containment—and our responsibility (Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, p. 168).

70. See Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 13, pp. 211–12 and “On the Risk of a New Relationality,” p. 17. See also Salamandra, “Prelude to an Uprising: Syrian Fictional Television and Socio-Political Critique,” www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/5578/prelude-to-an-uprising_syrian-fictional-television. My chapter on laughter in autocracy and in times of tumult, from which this section is drawn, and chapter four in *Ambiguities of Domination* cover some of what is a vast literature on humor in greater depth. My work is also in conversation with Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis, 1987).

dom, while the other maintains that it is too early, that people do not yet have the awareness to enact their freedom—or haven't sufficiently internalized what the term even means. The latter position is reminiscent of colonial and modernization discourses in which people have to move up the evolutionary ladder and become more "civilized" before they can be free. But it also speaks to the specificities of what Dawson calls "neoliberal dystopias," the simultaneous seduction and corruption that has attended the good life and that leaves even well-meaning but pragmatic cultural producers hard-pressed to register anything more than ambivalent support for political change.⁷¹

What Hajju's comedies invite us to do, nevertheless, is to consider a politics of ideological reproduction that is at least partially being placed at risk. His work offers both cynical conclusions and ways of seeing afresh, allowing us to attain a prohibited knowledge that we in fact already have (of the way that paranoia ramifies, for example). On the one hand—in its more typical moments of cynical frustration and, some would say, regime-oriented accommodation—the caricature of the village idiot seems to stand in for a generalized political backwardness, one that can only be alleviated through the tutelage of an enlightened, professional management-oriented elite. As noted earlier, an elective affinity during the 2000s between Syrian drama and regime officials produced what Donatella Della Ratta rightly calls a minority community of *tanwiri* (enlightened) cultural producers, who in conjunction with regime officials could envisage ruling over a "backward society," eventually enabling the majority's advancement through a process of secularizing, modernizing enlightenment.⁷² Hajju himself has repeatedly claimed that Syrian drama's mission was to help "heal social backwardness through drama."⁷³ In this view, television comedies are restorative in a double sense—of good humor in the face of dreary circumstances and of a political order favoring the Bashar al-Asad era's version of neoliberal citizen management.

On the other hand, *A Forgotten Village* provides more than a cynical

71. Michael C. Dawson, "Theory and Practice: Politics and Black Reparations in the Early Twenty-First Century," delivered as keynote address for "Does Reparations Have a Future? Rethinking Racial Justice in a 'Color-Blind' Era, Multidisciplinary Symposium," University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Va., 21–22 Mar. 2013, slide 35.

72. See Della Ratta, "Dramas of the Authoritarian State: The Politics of Syrian T.V. Serials in a Pan-Arab Market" (Ph.D. diss., University of Copenhagen, 2013), esp. pp. 57–128 and "The 'Whisper Strategy': How Syrian Drama Makers Shape Television Fiction in the Context of Authoritarianism and Commodification," in *Syria under Bashar al-Asad: Culture, Religion, and Society*, ed. Lief Stenberg and Salamandra (in progress).

73. Hajju, interviews with author, Mar. 2011, Aug. 2011, June 2012. See also Della Ratta, "Dramas of the Authoritarian State," esp. pp. 61, 76.

account of the people's (in)capacities and thus rises to the level of a critique of popular sovereignty and regime rule. For when comedies playfully mock the people, suggesting that they are not yet ready for political freedom, it is tantamount to arguing that the regime has been unable or unwilling to build state institutions capable of ensuring the education of a citizenry—and overcoming the impasses that make building worlds in concert so difficult. His is a pedagogical enterprise, one that at its best draws our attention to specific aspects of comedy as a genre and laughter as a political activity, in the sense that laughter is distinctly human, beckoning us to “look upon life as a disinterested spectator,” and requires the participation of others.⁷⁴ As Henri Bergson writes in his famous account of the comic, “however spontaneous it seems, laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers, real or imaginary” (*L*, p. 3). Laughter presumes a community but also remarks upon it, and in this double action it may also summon one into being.

Neither obviously emancipatory nor simply an instance of regime speak, Hajju's comedies operate in multiple emotional registers, with political implications complicated enough to have made them exceptionally popular in the decade prior to the 2011 uprising. Arguably no other comedy enjoyed the critical acclaim mustered by *A Forgotten Village*, however. Streets during Ramadan were empty in 2010, with a multigenerational audience celebrating by taking in the comic fare of this serial. Educated and noneducated viewers, regime officials and would-be opposition members, officers in the army and ordinary conscripts all took pleasure in the ways in which political absurdities under autocracy were chronicled. Knowing viewers touted the serial's agility in playing with linguistic incongruities.⁷⁵ The dialect of the coastal city of Lataqiyya was often spoken by characters with rural habits and dress codes (rendered in exaggerated form) of the surrounding countryside, for example. And subtitles translated colloquial Arabic into a modern standard, simultaneously making fun of subtitling conventions and ensuring a pan-Arab viewership. At once a celebration of Syria's multiculturalism, the series also offered a complicated picture of 'Alawi coastal dominance—many top officials come from that area of the country and self-identify or are identified as 'Alawi—⁷⁶ and it invited view-

74. Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brerton and Fred Rothwell (1911; Mineola, N.Y., 2005), p. 3; hereafter abbreviated *L*.

75. The reviews and comments are simply too numerous to cite here. The popularity of the series was also confirmed by Syrian students and in the advertising agencies where I spent time in winter 2011. Both proregime and opposition appropriation of lines and images from episodes are also worthy of note.

76. Importantly, many of the accents are more typical of the poor Sunni area of Slaybeh in Lataqiyya, and it is the smuggler whose 'Alawi dialect is particularly pronounced. The chief

ers of all stripes to laugh at themselves and at one another. A successful effort at community building that temporarily produced the collectivity it advocated, the trope of an insular village served both to contain political difference and mourn the absence of a functional modern nation-state.

In short, comedy and the laughter it provokes do important ideological work, sometimes shoring up political conventions, sometimes offering important challenges to them, and sometimes doing both at once. In its wryest moments, Hajju's comedy summons us toward what Adorno (in a different context) calls the "it could have been otherwise" of commitment—the theories and creative genres that have the capacity to conjure the coming-into-being of political activity (if not necessarily a novel political program) in the present.⁷⁷ On other occasions, or viewed from the vantage point of accommodation with the status quo, *A Forgotten Village* seems to lament a stasis it also helps to secure. Bergson once again comes to mind, recognizing the social, transformative dimensions of laughter, but also comedy's (especially) retrospective capacity to disappoint. Lkening laughter to a child's encounter with the snow-white foam of receding waves on a sandy beach, Bergson notes that a child grabbing a handful of foam finds himself a moment later with nothing more in his fist than surprisingly brackish water. "Laughter," continues Bergson, "comes into being in the self-same fashion. . . . Like froth, it sparkles. It is gaiety itself. But the philosopher who gathers a handful to taste may find that the substance is scanty, and the aftertaste bitter" (*L*, p. 98).

5. Concluding Remarks

This essay has focused primarily on the first year and a half of the uprising and the decade preceding it, an era of market-oriented reforms in which new aspirations to a consumer-oriented, urbane good life became moored to familiar, older fantasies of national sovereignty and multisectionarian peaceful coexistence. Only partially economic in content, the aspirational consciousness animating new forms of sociability and experiences of social freedom in this period found iconic expression in the Lady Di and

secret police agent who occasionally visits to supervise the village's management and berate the police for their incompetence wears the conventional leather jacket of someone of his ilk. Named Hummalali, colloquial for a person in the security forces whose punishments cause terrible pain, his accent is from the Hawran, an area in the southern interior near Jordan whose inhabitants were disproportionately members of the ruling Ba'th party until the uprising. Dar'a, the site of the school-children's arrest and subsequent protest, is in the Hawran.

77. Quoted in Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 13. See Theodor Adorno, "Commitment," trans. Francis McDonagh, *New Left Review* 87–88 (Sept.–Dec. 1974): 75–89.

Prince Charles–like imagery of Syria’s first family. Idealizing the modern, urban professional-managerial class, the first family offered one version of what it meant to be exemplary of the good public in Syria—glamorous, entrepreneurial, individually responsible, and civilized. The veneer of a kinder, specifically neoliberal autocracy glossed over the economic cruelties caused by the state’s attenuation of social provisioning (including widening inequalities and new opportunities for corruption) and the ongoing use of coercive control to handle unrest.

As authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya began to teeter, some Syrians, affectively invested in stability and consumer pleasure, voiced hopes that the seemingly popular young president would understand the need for reforms and manage an orderly transition to an electoral system. Instead, like a deadly blast from the past, in apparent homage to the more overtly dictatorial practices of the father, old guard political advisers were brought back from retirement, making the regime’s fear of losing autocratic control glaringly apparent. This intention of regime dominance found dramatic and unusually candid expression in a *New York Times* interview with the notorious first cousin and (fittingly, given the neoliberal context) paragon of corrupt entrepreneurship, Rami Makhlouf. Even as the president went on promising reforms, Makhlouf declared as early as 10 May 2011 that the regime was determined to “fight to the end.”⁷⁸ Just as security forces found a new *raison d’être* in their (re)expanded duties, so too did disrespect for autocratic control increase. And in an ideological struggle over who stands in for Syria, it was children who would substitute for the first family, offering up a vision of innocence and helplessness in the face of the professional managerial elite’s consuming market-oriented excesses and the regime’s overweening political power. Whether it was the young students arrested in Dar‘a, the more anonymous children who prompted anxieties about milk deprivation in the face of a military siege, or the widely circulated images of a tortured-to-death thirteen-year-old boy, Hamza al-Khatib, children signaled the disruptions of generational change, unmet aspirations for the good life, and the affronts to dignity (*karama*) that neoliberal autocracy both effected and attempted to conceal. The regime’s idealized world was revealed as a fantasy with little chance of accessing an actual world (of glamor or, later, sectarian peaceful coexistence and national sovereignty) to which the fantasy could be anchored. In this context a younger generation’s savvy at

78. Anthony Shadid, “Syrian Elite to Fight Protests to ‘the End,’” 11 May 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/05/11/world/middleeast/11makhlouf.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

circulating images of brutality became a form of protest in its own right, a way of bearing the brutality by bearing witness.

Hajju's comedies adumbrated a newfound ability to express collective disrespect. For comedy is a mode of aggression, raising questions of how we talk about collective life and who the "we" is that gets to talk in the first place. In Hajju's case, as with all tolerated comedy, the refreshing irreverence was also a way of containing the very hostility it acknowledged—even encouraged—reflecting the managerial class's ambivalence to a system of rule that celebrated their presence. As a critique of prevailing forms of power, his comedy provided the impression of regime openness while underscoring citizens' attachment to and recognition of their own subjection. That recognition is almost always dual, inducing complacency among some but also laying the groundwork for potentially new disruptive publics.

In the current era of enormous upheaval, in which "hopes are sparked and snuffed and sparked again,"⁷⁹ the privilege of the professional-managerial elite has ceased to be self-reproducing. And along with the war's anguish and disappointment and terror, there remain resilient enclaves of world-affirming possibility—collective imaginaries ill-defined and by no means programmatically articulated but that, at the very least, refuse the self-evidence of dictatorship. It is my hope that assertions of dignity and Syrian unity (*wahid, wahid, wahid, al-sha'ab al-suri wahid* [one, one, one, the Syrian people are one]) amidst unspeakable indignities and chaos do not ultimately lead back to either an autocracy or the emaciated forms of electoral contestation that pass for democracy in places like the United States. And I dream of a nonnationalist, antiimperial collective imaginary that finds seduction and pleasure in alternatives to the neoliberal and, yes, even Keynesian capitalist order.

79. The phrase is taken from the book jacket for Mohsin Hamid, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (New York, 2013).