

# Living in a dictatorship

*By Karine Clément*

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**A new book uses an ethnological approach to shed light on the spaces of freedom and solidarity created by citizens in rural Belarus, Europe's last dictatorship. But these spaces, in some cases, also accommodate the regime.**

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Reviewed: Ronan Hervouet, *Le Goût des tyrans. Une ethnographie politique du quotidien en Biélorussie (A Taste for Tyrants: A Political Ethnography of Everyday Life in Belarus)*, Paris, Éd. du Bord de l'eau, 2020. 281 p., 24 €.

While studies of dictatorships and authoritarianism usually examine their institutions and founders, Ronan Hervouet's book on the authoritarian regime in Belarus offers a welcome reminder that these governments do not have an exclusively repressive and restrictive relationship with their populations. The anthropological reality of these societies differs considerably from this assumption, revealing a wide range of relationships to authoritarian systems: adaptation, support, avoidance, and reinterpretation (not to mention resistance).

## A fragmented ethnography

Like several previous scholars,<sup>1</sup>Hervouet reminds us that political systems, including authoritarian ones, cannot exist without a degree of consent--or, at

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<sup>1</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, Yale University Press, 1992; Michael Burawoy, Catherine Verdery, eds., *Uncertain Transition: Ethnographies of Change in the Postsocialist World*,

minimum, tolerance and habit. This does not mean that particular peoples or social groups are genetically prone to authoritarianism.

This is why the main criticism one could make of this book concerns its title, which Hervouet calls into question in the course of his own argument, which goes well beyond stereotypical, all-encompassing theorization. No, there is no such thing as a "taste" for tyranny, which would necessarily be "bad taste" in Pierre Bourdieu's sense. An explanation of why such regimes are accepted requires examining the deepest recesses of social reality.

This is the challenge that Hervouet has set for himself. His book is a "plunge into the daily life of Europe's last dictatorship." This is what makes it so rich and interesting, brimming with colorful details and enlightening stories. The first thing to note is that his book reads like a novel, revolving around the lives of a few individuals that the author has somewhat randomly selected during his wanderings, but whose life experiences, when connected to one another and subtly interpreted, make sense and shed new light on authoritarianism's complex social reality.

One of the book's most wonderful and instructive chapters is the second, in which Hervouet, with humility and sincerity, presents his research methodology, which he calls a "fragmented ethnography" (*ethnographie en pointillé*). This brief passage must without question be read by all apprentice sociologists and anthropologists--and many more--because it offers tried-and-tested and annotated "tricks"<sup>2</sup> for studying milieus (in this instance, a working-class milieu) and countries (Belarus) that are often not easily accessible to researchers.

Hervouet proves that, even when resources and institutional support are lacking, inventiveness, ingenuity, as well as determination, attention to detail, and the ability to listen can, in the hands of an expert, work miracles and produce original knowledge, through long-term studies in which the researcher revisits, on numerous occasions, the same people and places.

It is more difficult to praise the book's stated ambition of being an ethnography of the daily lives of working-class people in general. In fact, the book is mainly concerned with world of the countryside, which Hervouet knows well, having studied

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Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000; Caroline Humphrey, *The Unmaking of Soviet Life: Everyday Economies after Socialism*, Cornell University Press, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Howard Becker, *Tricks of the Trade: How to Think about Your Research While You're Doing It*, University of Chicago Press, 1998.

it in his dissertation.<sup>3</sup> This, in my view, is the book's main limitation: it never states that it is almost exclusively concerned with the rural world. It generalizes its observations and arguments to industrial and urban milieus, though it lacks the empirical data to do so.

The absence of any reference to the industrial world is all the more regrettable in that the French ethnographic literature that Hervouet references<sup>4</sup> deals precisely with workers. Workers' strikes and mobilizations against Alexander Lukashenko in several Belarusian industrial companies during the protests provoked by the falsification of the results of the 2020 presidential election demonstrated that at least some of the working class could openly revolt against an authoritarian president, despite the risks.

It is also unfortunate that the book fails to consider the authoritarian neoliberal economic policies implemented by the regime, which is contrary to how the country is often portrayed--that is, as one of the last countries with a socialist economy. Hervouet mentions this fact in passing (when describing the fixed-term contracts adopted in 2002 as a "principle inspired by neoliberalism," p. 23), but he does not emphasize it. Most importantly, he does not consider neoliberalism's impact, notably the proliferation of short-term contracts in working-class communities, whose rights and capacity for resistance are far more limited.

## Conviviality and solidarity

Most of the book is not concerned with these issues, but with Hervouet's dense and subtle analysis of the spaces of freedom and solidarity that actors have been able to forge--notably by using, either legally or illegally, the tools that the existing system places at their disposal and allows them to appropriate.

The description of the way in which the kolkhozes function brings to light the interdependencies that form the sinews of the local system and explain why people,

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<sup>3</sup> See the book drawn from his dissertation: Ronan Hervouet, *Datcha blues. Existences ordinaires et dictature en Biélorussie*, Paris, Belin ("Europes centrales") [first edition: 2007, Montreuil, Aux lieux d'être ("Mondes contemporains")], 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Olivier Schwartz, *Le monde privé des ouvriers*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1990; Florence Weber, *Le Travail à côté. Étude d'ethnographie ouvrière*. Paris: INRA/EHESS, 1989.

whatever their place in the power structure, stay together (or stay with one another), allowing everyone to get by, more or less (chapter 5, 109-125).

This picture, Hervouet reminds us, is contrary to the one presented by "journalistic and academic discourses [that] emphasize constraint, fear, and violence" (p. 124-125). It might also have been worth examining inequalities tied to the more or less privileged positions occupied by individuals in the system of informal interdependencies. Thanks to the informal system, those in subordinate positions find themselves better off, with some even managing to "construct worlds that they see as desirable" (p. 127). Even so, they remain in subordinate roles, with little room for maneuver.

It is also worth noting that Hervouet shows that the peasants' world is not based on anomie and looking out for oneself--lifestyles that became Russia's sad reality in the wake of the ultra-liberal reforms of the 1990s. To the contrary, Hervouet offers a detailed account of the forms of solidarity that are created in these settings (chapter 7, pp. 149-172). For instance, he examines different examples of *subbonitki*--vacation days devoted to volunteer work, a Soviet legacy--presenting the multiple interpretations of them offered by the actors. He shows the elements of altruism, conviviality, and solidarity that accompany these practices, which, consequently, are not simply obligations decreed from above, but activities lending themselves to multiple reappropriations from below.

Hervouet also offers a welcome description of "practical" solidarity, which results from an injunction to act that is experienced as a ritual that creates possibilities for action--and for acting differently and better.

## A "satisfying" rural world?

Norms promulgated from above are neither automatically nor passively adopted below: they give rise to multiple reappropriations, usurpations, and accommodations that Hervouet describes, drawing on Michel de Certeau and Erving Goffman.<sup>5</sup> Even so, he concludes that "the reappropriations one sees are not radically emancipated from power's aims" (p. 171). Later, he observes that "the meaning which

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<sup>5</sup> Michel de Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien: 1: Arts de faire*. Gallimard, 1990 [1980]; Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. Chicago, Aldine, 1961.

actors give to their actions, while not mechanically determined by power, nonetheless clearly echoes it" (ibid.).

On several occasions, Hervouet returns to the idea that the actors' practical inventiveness echoes the discourses of power. But he never defines this concept of "echoing." Nor does he consider that it might be the discourses of power that, to a degree, "echo" the aspirations and values of the peasant world below.

These values (chapter 8, pp. 173-193) trace the contours of a life that could well be considered worthy of living and that allows for a sense of personal dignity. The criteria of a worthy life include the possibility--conceived as being equally accessible to all--of satisfying one's need for material wellbeing, merit, autonomy, and solidarity: "The world of the collectivized countryside can, in this way, be experienced as just" (p. 193).

This observation must not be taken lightly. To a considerable extent, it explains why criticism of the regime is relatively weak, in contrast to the situation in Russia, Belarus' neighbor, where working-class worlds, whether in cities or the countryside, are experienced as unjust. The author emphasizes this point: "The conclusion that a worthy life is possible does not result from a state's ideology's performativity" (p. 191). In simpler terms, the rural working class values the world they have forged and is thus not, in principle, attracted to the prospect of radical change, which they see as potentially catastrophic.

Hervouet presents the ordinary conception of politics as excluding a radical challenge to the regime's legitimacy and the rules governing peasant worlds, which are considered just and satisfying. Critiques of everyday life are far more likely to be directed at the "world's fragility" (chapter 9, pp. 195-218), which could threaten the stability of an acceptable form of life. The threat to collective rural morality comes not from the system, but from individuals whom Hervouet dubs "moral offenders": "profiteers," "the lazy," and "moralizers"--specifically, the liberal opposition.

## **A Two-Way Street**

The authorities and people with power are asked to protect rural communities from threats. But the system is particularly expected to respect these communities'

"moral economy" (in E. P. Thompson's and James Scott's sense<sup>6</sup>). In practical terms, the regime is expected to tolerate the "petty illegalities that allow honest people to live properly" and protect their "just world" (p. 217).

Hervouet concludes his book by rejecting the idea of absolute domination and the annihilation of actors' critical capacities. Rural communities accommodate the authoritarian regime because of a moral economy that "echoes"--without mechanically reproducing--the regime's ideological principles (p. 241), particularly by emphasizing equality, solidarity, and dignity. "Attachment to these principles [is] a symbolic extension of practices rooted in daily life" (p. 242). This insight leads one to believe that the "echoing" between state propaganda and rural values is a two-way street.

The book manages to transcend "binary thinking" (p. 243), which contrasts support and opposition and resistance and collaboration--antagonistic dualisms that are often used to define authoritarian (and other) regimes. Hervouet goes so far as suggest that the "hidden transcript"<sup>7</sup> is intertwined with the public transcript: even sub-political activities and underground practices of resistance are enmeshed in official discourse. This conception of intertwinement is undoubtedly Hervouet's most significant contribution to the study of ordinary politics.

First published in [laviedesidees.fr](http://laviedesidees.fr), April 26, 2021. Translated by Michael Behrent, with the support of [Cairn.info](http://Cairn.info). Published in [booksandideas.net](http://booksandideas.net), 11 July 2023

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<sup>6</sup> James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976 ; E. P. Thompson, "The moral economy of the English crowd in the eighteenth century," *Past & Present* 50.1, 1971, 76-136.

<sup>7</sup> Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*.