



Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria

Lisa Wedeen

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In Syria, the image of President Hafiz al-Asad is everywhere. In newspapers, on television, and during orchestrated spectacles Asad is praised as the "father," the "gallant knight," even the country's "premier pharmacist." Yet most Syrians, including those who create the official rhetoric, do not believe its claims. Why would a regime spend scarce resources on a cult whose content is patently spurious?

Wedeen concludes that Asad's cult acts as a disciplinary device, generating a politics of public dissimulation in which citizens act *as if* they revered their leader. By inundating daily life with tired symbolism, the regime exercises a subtle, yet effective form of power. The cult works to enforce obedience, induce complicity, isolate Syrians from one another, and set guidelines for public speech and behavior. Wedeen's ethnographic research demonstrates how Syrians recognize the disciplinary aspects of the cult and seek to undermine them. Provocative and original, *Ambiguities of Domination* is a significant contribution to comparative politics, political theory, and cultural studies.

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