

Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman, *Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century*, Princeton University Press, 2022, 360 pps. Paperback, \$19.95.

Dictatorships are often viewed as the nemesis of market growth, the expansion of the free world, and a hindrance to globalization. However, this is the inherent political oxymoron of a dictatorship: to distinguish itself with its overreaching rule but being part of a political system of a balanced government. One of the most glaring misperceptions of this form of government is the subtle dress of democracy in *acceptable* Western nations that are adorned with constitutions, bicameral national government and free press, yet have evolved into agents and provocateurs of political and religious rhetoric just as dangerously as any other form of government. This demonstrates that the absolute dictatorship could not exist solely as a one-ruler political vehicle, but as part of an inter-related and interdependent mechanism that still mimics democratic governance. Sergei Guriev, Professor of Economics at the Department of Economics at Sciences Po, Paris and Daniel Treisman, Professor of Political Science at University of California, Los Angeles, provide a dual definition of dictator through the philosophical lens of Aristotle. They then outline the hierarchy under this sort of governmental rule as: 1) political leader (dictator), 2) the informed (authoritarian), and 3) the general public (democratic). Based on this structure, Guriev and Treisman assert that spin dictators can filter into networks that control political information, appear to be democratically inclined but control political opposition by using established systems to oppress the general public yet still gain their trust to become popular. Thus, the dictator has accomplished the feat of a democratic façade but with the societal reality of a dictatorship.

The authors present a recurring and seemingly absolute approach that rulers have the most power while citizens are uninformed sheep. Depending on the regime, one can easily assume that these rulers, even dictators are heavily controlled and manipulated by their own supporters and political campaign investors. Despite this conundrum, the authors proffer a more balanced approach in their critique. They then explore instances in which dictators use

accessible, practical methods to control the opposition. The challengers to their partially psychological methodologies are used not only by the public, but also the freethinker who would not likely succumb to 'herd' or 'groupthink' mentality. Nonetheless, Guriev and Treisman discuss these avenues of political oppression and enumerate them as follows: arresting dissidents, using violence against the general public, gaslighting, filtering rhetoric through media outlets, and bankrupting the opposition. Interestingly, the perceived biggest threat to dictators are individuals. It is easier for a dictator to use his political influence through leaders of groups of masses to achieve his desired aims. It is a trickle-down effect that has a quicker result rather than targeting an individual. Yet within this political orchestra their leader is the middleman of an acceptable message, while the dictator is the veiled composer of the masses. In contrast, the individual free-thinker seeks to have the dictator replaced to establish or revive true democracy, quelling the dissatisfaction of the unintelligible masses. Thus, the dictator and his supporters resort to “*Zersetzung*”—literally “corrosion”—the method aimed to “disrupt the target's personal life and career, isolate him from friends and family, and make him question his own sanity” (p.50). This is a focused effort against a perceived powerless individual. Yet the dictator understands that his mind is a sufficient weapon to help overthrow, or at least interfere with, the current political structure.

The authors then assert that during economic downturns, some political regimes resort to dictatorships as a means to maintain their power. Using the authors' three-tier hierarchy, those of the middle, such as free thinkers and financiers or even quasi-private industries—including those that control the production of the nation's currency still greatly influence the direction of the political and economic tides that buoy or sink the general public. The dictator not only wears the current style of rhetoric as a part of its political fashion, but he also adorns himself in the tangible representation of the consummate leader, a suit and tie. However, even this dogmatic ensemble could not prevent the dictator from expressing his own dissatisfaction

if those who disagreed with his ruler were within physical proximity. Therefore, appointees within his cabinet were subject to the same targeted and violent actions that free thinkers or dissidents were.

Guriev and Treisman remind the reader that the dictator has evolved since the 1980s and 1990s by not simply using overt and violent means to control the public; they could still present themselves as empathetic leaders who were able to sway and control public opinion. This arguably became the 'dictator of spin'. This is the intersection between fear and propaganda. The authors use statistical analysis from multiple sources counting millions of news articles to present their case of fear dictatorship (mockery) versus spin dictatorship (assurance). They further provide correlation between media access and dictator approval ratings. The dictator is able to legally wield agents of violence against the masses, implement political and personal ruin onto the individual and use rhetoric to suppress both. The dictator uses charismatic speech, *regardless of the facts*, to uphold or improve his reputation, to placate the masses and to discredit the individuals falsely presented as the true enemies of democracy.

Spin Dictators provides a zealous critique and various examples of the hidden autocracy by sampling and measuring dictatorships and their central leaders. The text is suited for those who desire to learn about the oxymoronic concept of the dictatorship through the use of sociological, psychological and political lenses. The authors use ample citations and statistics to further analyze the concept, ideology and practical reality of dictatorships whether these nation states are of Eastern, South American or Middle Eastern regions. Guriev and Treisman conclude that "adversarial engagement" is the best alternative approach as a more evolved political countermeasure.

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