

A Critical Review of Milan Svobik's *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*

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The reader of this essay has already been misled: despite the above title, there will be little that is critical of Svobik's masterful *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* in this review. The only critique will be relegated for last and will be largely tangential, leaving the overall theoretical framework unscathed. For Svobik's theory is nuanced yet parsimonious, his approach multi-methodological and sophisticated, and his conclusions clear and compelling. As a brief sketch, Svobik argues that authoritarian politics arise out of a uniquely caustic and violent "state of nature." This state of nature is a product of 1) a lack of an independent authority capable of enforcing credible commitments amongst political actors, and 2) the pervasiveness of gruesome violence (pg. 14). As a result, authoritarian politics center on two political conflicts: first, between the ruler(s) and the ruled (*the problem of authoritarian control*), and second, between the dictator and his ruling coalition (*the problem of authoritarian power-sharing*) (pg. 2). This essay will begin by expanding and explicating the foregoing distillation of Svobik's theory, and will conclude with a few remarks that suggest the importance of one variable – namely the personality of dictators – that Svobik overlooks.

Authoritarian politics, argues Svobik, are messy, dangerous, and, more importantly, undertheorized or misinterpreted by political scientists. He defines dictatorship as an independent country that "fails to satisfy at least one of the following two criteria for democracy: (1) free and competitive legislative elections and (2) an executive that is elected either directly in free and competitive presidential elections or indirectly by a legislature in parliamentary systems" (pg. 22). Admittedly, this tells us more about what a dictatorship is *not* than what it *is*, and indeed Svobik notes that the challenge in studying authoritarian politics lies in making sense of the "extraordinary political diversity across dictatorships" (pg. 19). Past attempts, argues Svobik, have missed the mark. In particular, Svobik sets his approach in contradistinction to that of Barbara Geddes, a scholar who, despite being the recipient of Svobik's gratitude for her "seminal contribution" to the study of dictatorships (pg. 29), is equally the target of a blitzkrieg of

sophisticated critique. Geddes's typology¹ of personalist, military, and single-party dictatorships constructs regime types that are, according to Svobik, neither mutually exclusive nor comparatively exhaustive (pg. 29). The distinction between military and single-party dictatorships, for example, occurs across different conceptual dimensions, namely between the "degree of military involvement in politics" and the degree of "[restrictions] on political parties" (pg. 29). Further, Geddes' typology is incomplete; as one example, it is unclear where autocratic monarchies would fit in her framework (pg. 31). What is required, argues Svobik, is not a set of neat but flawed ideal types, but rather a set of four continua upon which authoritarianism can be measured. These continua include 1) military involvement in politics, 2) restrictions on political parties, 3) legislative selection, and 4) executive selection (pg. 32). Only then can political scientists make sense of regimes that seem to cross the artificial boundaries erected by Geddes-like typologies.

Having provided a framework to describe and make sense of the diversity of authoritarian regimes, Svobik turns to an analysis of the two fundamental conflicts defining authoritarian politics: that of authoritarian power-sharing (Chapters 3 and 4) and of authoritarian control (Chapters 5 and 6). The problem of authoritarian power sharing is characterized by the dictator's attempts to monopolize and maintain power while his ruling coalition simultaneously attempts to curtail his power or to overthrow him. As a helpful heuristic, Svobik notes that there are two equilibria characterizing authoritarian regimes. First, "[u]nder contested autocracy, a rebellion threatened by the ruling coalition has sufficient ex-ante credibility to deter [the dictator's] opportunism," and thus the equilibrium outcome is one of power-sharing between the dictator and his ruling coalition (pg. 61). Second, under "established autocracy [...] a dictator succeeds in consolidating enough power that he can no longer be credibly threatened by his ruling coalition," and thus we have an equilibrium outcome of pure one-man autocracy (pg. 61). The dictator can attempt to secure the latter outcome by publicly signaling his invincibility via rotations, dismissals, or personal attacks (pg. 80). From the ruling coalition's standpoint, the key is to adopt institutions, such as "committees, politburos, or councils that are embedded in authoritarian parties and legislatures" (pg. 90), that alleviate the commitment problem inherent in authoritarian power-sharing (pgs. 86-87). These institutions enable the members of the ruling

¹ Geddes, Barbara. 1999. "What Do We Know About Democratization after Twenty Years?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 2: 115-144.

coalition to communicate with one another and to monitor transgressions by the dictator (pg. 87). In other words, “the key function of institutions like parties and legislatures in dictatorships,” concludes Svulik, “is therefore distinctly authoritarian” (pg. 88). Indeed, Svulik’s statistical results highlight a “strong, systemic empirical association between authoritarian parties or legislatures and the stability of dictatorships” (pg. 115).

The second problem, that of authoritarian control, presents the dictator with a complicated quandary: the dictator has to rely on repression to prevent popular uprisings, but this creates a moral hazard, for “[the] very resources that enable the regime’s repressive agents to suppress its oppositions also empower them to act against the regime itself” (pg. 124). Svulik argues that the degree to which dictators choose to empower military forces is determined by the strength of the popular opposition they face. When the popular threat to the regime is small, the dictator need not empower the military, thereby facilitating his “perfect political control” (pg. 134). Conversely, when the popular threat is extreme, the dictator must rely on, and fully empower, the military, whose power subsequently crowds out that of the dictator in an equilibrium of “military tutelage” (pg. 134). The most unstable and interesting scenario occurs when the popular opposition is moderately strong (conditions of “brinkmanship bargaining”) (pg. 135). Here, a complicated strategic calculus develops between the dictator and the military. On the one hand, the military seeks to leverage its influence and to threaten the dictator’s power to obtain “institutional autonomy, resources, and influence over policy” (pg. 125). On the other hand, the dictator questions the resolve of the military and attempts to make as few concessions as possible (pg. 125). Military overthrow of the dictator occurs when the dictator underestimates the military threat and “rocks the boat” too much (pg. 125). Finally, Svulik moves to an analysis of why dictators would tolerate or benefit from a regime party. He argues that regime parties strengthen autocratic control via the “hierarchical assignment of service and benefits, political control over appointments, and selective recruitment and repression” (pg. 163). These party tools stack benefits of party membership at the senior levels, thus “[exploiting] their members’ opportunism and career aspirations to create a stake in the perpetuation of the regime among the most productive and ideologically agreeable segments of the population” (pg. 163). This process of co-optation conditions benefits on “prior costly service” while “[marginalizing] actual opposition” (pgs. 164; 166). Further, by leveraging party mechanisms of political communication, mobilization, and intelligence gathering, the dictator can more easily assert “direct political

control” over its members (pg. 164). Similar to the empirical results in Chapter 4, Svulik’s statistical results surface an “empirical association between dictatorships with single parties and the survival of the regimes that maintain them” (pg. 192).

What has hopefully been highlighted by the foregoing summary is the theoretical nuance of Svulik’s argument, a nuance backed by a diverse array of historical examples, game theoretic models, and sophisticated statistical analyses. It should thus come as no surprise that the following critique has less to do with Svulik’s argument and more to do with what it overlooks.

Specifically, Svulik does not give the reader a good sense of what types of people dictators are. This point enters the realm of political psychology and historiography rather than strategic interaction, and perhaps Svulik was unwilling to enter this domain because it diverges from a path that lends itself to formalization and cross-national empirical validation. Nevertheless, such “intangibles” appear to be a crucial aspect of the politics of authoritarian rule. The cover of Svulik’s book displays a chilling photo of Augusto Pinochet – wearing bold black sunglasses, defiantly crossing his arms, with a group of aloof and stern henchmen standing behind him. Are the personal qualities that this photo exudes – confidence, pugnaciousness – common amongst dictators? Perhaps not, for Svulik notes that Stalin was both “short in stature” and “a mediocre speaker” (pg. 80). Yet surely the paths to hegemony for the unimpressive Stalin and the charismatic Pinochet must have been different in part because of their divergent personalities. Further, given the degree to which power is concentrated in a single individual in many dictatorships, we can safely assume that the authoritarian apparatus will take on some of the personality traits of its ruler. Comparing the ruthlessness with which the North Korean apparatus religiously serves the worship of its god-like “dear leader” with the more permissive and casual authoritarianism of Spain under Francisco Franco serves to illustrate this point. Individuals matter more in dictatorships than in democracies, and it would therefore follow that their personalities, idiosyncrasies, and psychologies would take on greater importance too.

But this is a minor point - more quibbling than a fatal blow. Svulik’s book is impressive, a work that will satisfy both game theorists enamored with equations and equilibria as well as political scientists seeking a theoretically stimulating framework to make sense of the historical variety and violent chaos plaguing authoritarian politics.