

“Association and Recognition in Authoritarian Societies: A Theoretical Beginning”

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This is a normative and exegetical project within the field of political theory. It will begin with a sketch of a theoretical paradigm within which the existence of civic associations in authoritarian regimes can be discussed and analyzed. By relating the concepts of ‘civil society’ and ‘recognition,’ I will explore how associations are a potential locus of mutual recognition in any society, democratic or undemocratic. I will argue that through their ability to partially fulfill the human need for mutual recognition, associations will arise even when there are not democratic protections and the freedom of association.

While there are many theorizations of both civil society and recognition in relation to democratic political contexts, normative theories seeking to explain the existence of associations in authoritarian societies are less robustly developed. This project will add to theoretical debates about both human association and mutual recognition by broadening the discussion beyond the borders of democracy. It will assume that civil society is not a concept limited to a democratic context where freedoms of association and freedoms of speech are protected by a tolerant government. Rather, ‘civil society’ will be taken as those places where civility is peacefully nurtured through human association, acknowledging that there can be islands of civility within repressive polities and islands of incivility within democratic polities. Recognition, more specifically mutual recognition, will be theorized not only as one key ‘good’ sought through the act of forming the associations of civil society, but also as a human need which will prompt the act of association within dangerous and potentially life-threatening contexts.

This analysis will therefore inform the thinking behind acts of civil disobedience springing from civil society, as well as rationalizations for dissident activities undertaken by associations within authoritarian regimes. The texts and writings produced by dissidents within authoritarian societies will be the primary sources for contextualizing my theoretical assertions. These texts will be put in conversation with not only theories of civil society and recognition, but also with theories of civil disobedience.

This theoretical project aims for a more detailed illumination of why associations form to meet the human need of mutual recognition in societies both democratic and non-democratic, within oppressive, insecure, and secure borders, and within the protections of citizenship and outside of them. In doing so, it will move towards a normative theory of how civil society exists in authoritarian states.