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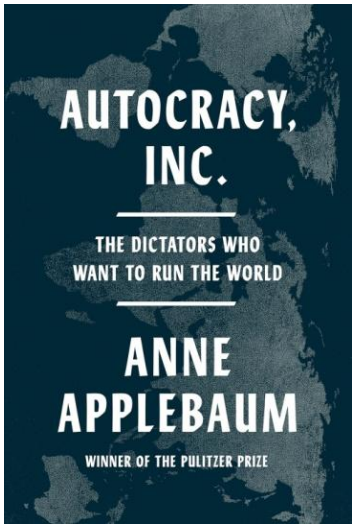
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Autocracy, Inc.: The Dictators Who Want to Run the World

By Anne Applebaum (Author) (Publisher: Doubleday/Penguin Random House 2024)

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The caricature of authoritarianism, with a "bad guy" at the top, a police and army under his command, a few evil accomplices, and a handful of brave opponents, no longer reflects the reality of the twenty-first century. In this regard, Anne Applebaum demonstrates in this book that today's autocracies do not operate as one-person pyramids but as complex networks of state and parastatal corporations, kleptocratic oligarchs, security complexes, and propaganda machines. These networks are not only interconnected within each country but also maintain deep connections across borders. Ideological commonality is not necessarily the basis of these connections; instead, they are often rooted in "deals" and mutual benefit. This argument is clearly stated from the opening pages and forms the conceptual foundation of the book.

The book is structured with an introduction and five chapters: "Greed That Binds," "Kleptocracy Metastasizes," "Controlling the Narrative," "Changing the Operating System," "Smearing the Democrats," and concludes with "Epilogue: Democrats United." As the reader progresses, the narrative shifts from the political economy of rent and kleptocracy to information engineering, then to the transformation of the international order, and finally to the confrontation with democratic forces. Through this progression, the author guides the reader from financial and security mechanisms to the informational and normative battleground.

In the chapters, Applebaum illustrates how Venezuela, for example, sustains its "unlikely" relationships with Iran, Russia, China, Cuba, and Turkey as an unpopular regime by leveraging oil, gold, sanctions evasion, and anti-democratic countermobilizations. Secret oil sales through networks of shell companies, purchases of dual-use parts for Russian military contractors, and gold and food trades illuminate the links between the shadow economy and security. Amidst these narratives, Applebaum poses a pointed question that gives the reader a tangible sense of a "network," not a "block": "How many similar schemes remain undiscovered?"

The chapter "Controlling the Narrative" is particularly significant. While discussing "money laundering" in the corporate world, Applebaum also characterizes media outlets such as RT, PressTV, Telesur, and CGTN as "clip factories" and "feeders of human/social networks."

The linking of Xinhua and RT offices in Africa, the reproduction of messages in multiple languages, and the coexistence of real and fake accounts mirror the tactics observed during the 2016 US election with the Internet Research Agency content farms, which were later exported to African and Latin American media markets. The objective was to convey a single message: democracy equals disorder and corruption, whereas autocracy equals order and efficiency.

A striking example is Japan's "Kansai Airport" incident, which illustrates the effectiveness of disinformation, from an anonymous Chinese-affiliated website generating fake images to Taiwanese media coverage and the tragic consequences for a diplomat. The Japanese government later confirmed that no "Chinese buses" were involved. By tracing the chain of anonymous websites, online accounts, and mainstream media coverage, Applebaum demonstrates how internal polarization within democracies fuels emotional manipulation.

The author also traces the convergence of Chinese and Russian information operations with examples from 2023–2024, from fake "weather weapon" images in Maui to the use of MAGA symbols to attack President Biden. Conspiracies such as "Ukrainian biolabs," propagated by Russian and Chinese sources and echoed in US networks, show how an international echo chamber is constructed through both formal and informal actors, leaving a lasting perceptual impact even after official denials.

At the normative and institutional level, the book examines the gradual shift in the "software of order" from the language of "desirable pluralism" to parallel institutional arrangements such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS. Principles of "non-intervention," "recognition of sovereignty," and "avoidance of mutual criticism" within these forums promote a model of "rule by law", where "law" reflects the will of the ruler. Reflecting on the history of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and post–World War II hopes, Applebaum reminds us that these parallel institutions are more than symbolic; they actively redefine the rules of the international system.

Another strength of the book is its demonstration of the "civil death" of dissidents and the transboundary nature of repression, evident in assassinations and harassment of dissidents in Europe and the United States, as well as quasi-legal agreements for the return of exiles. By citing examples from the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Thailand, and Turkey, Applebaum shows how a state's security definitions can extend beyond its borders, rendering the free life of exiles unsafe.

Nonetheless, there are some criticisms. Methodologically, the precise operationalization of concepts such as "connectivity intensity" and "degree of membership" within the "Autocracy, Inc." network is not adequately explained. The text references "financial, information, and security linkages" but does not provide measurable metrics, such as network centrality indicators, institutional affiliations, or the weight of financial flows. Opportunities to move from event-driven narratives to network modeling, particularly in chapters discussing China/Russia convergence in online tactics, are not fully realized.

Additionally, the selection of examples often favors the argument for an authoritarian network. Cases like Venezuela, Belarus, and Zimbabwe confirm the "profit-oriented ecosystem" hypothesis, but less attention is given to "marginal" or inconsistent cases, such as instances where ties with democracies limited repression or created intra-coalitional divisions. This asymmetry could have been addressed by carefully examining counterexamples.



The connection between norms and tools is also underdeveloped. While Applebaum highlights the erosion of rights-based language and the rise of parallel institutionalization, she does not translate these insights into a "prioritized policy toolbox." For example, it is not clearly specified which corporate ownership gaps should be closed, which content labeling practices should be standardized, or which arrangements for monitoring dual-use items would be most effective.

Despite these shortcomings, the book makes a significant contribution to international relations literature. Conceptually, it shifts the lens from "isolated authoritarianisms" to "connected authoritarianisms," framing the global political economy, information security, and the geopolitics of norms. Empirically, it demonstrates why traditional tools such as sanctions or normative statements are insufficient when intermediary networks in democracies, banks, real estate markets, shell companies, and platforms play a structural role in rent cycles. At the normative level, it highlights the distinction between "rule of law" and "rule by law" as central to contemporary global order competition.

The text suggests four policy recommendations aligned with its arguments: First, close shell companies by implementing strict transparency standards on ultimate beneficial ownership across sectors such as real estate, energy, and precious metals, as illustrated by the Venezuela-Russia-China oil/parts network. Second, establish common anti-"information laundering" standards across platforms and public media in democratic countries. Third, strengthen regional cooperation on dual-use component export controls and supply chain tracking, focusing on intermediary links that facilitate sanctions evasion. Fourth, provide targeted support for civil society facing "civil death," including legal protection, emergency exit routes, and secure financial support, since the survival of opposition forces is essential for dialogue and political reform.

Ultimately, "Autocracy, Inc." serves as both a timely policy map and a warning. It offers a vivid depiction of the financial, informational, and security connections sustaining contemporary authoritarianism. Its primary value lies in precisely defining the problem and mapping the geography of connections, from oil and gold chains to the circulation of parallel narratives and institutions. While some academic readers may desire measurable network models or a prioritized policy toolbox, the book provides ample fuel for further research. Concepts such as an "authoritarian entanglement index" or measurement of the "information laundering spillover effect" could be explored. For scholars of international relations and those interested in economic security and digital governance, this book is both essential and provocative.

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