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Anxious Reproduction: Middle-Class Security, Authoritarian Protection, and the Political Economy of Continuity

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between middle-class formations and authoritarian governance through the prism of social reproduction, insecurity, and political continuity. Rather than interpreting middle-class engagements with authoritarian regimes primarily through ideology, coercion, or political alignment, the article argues that authoritarianism increasingly functions as a reproductive regime: a set of institutional, moral, and bureaucratic arrangements that promise continuity amid economic volatility, institutional erosion, and social fragmentation. Positioned between declining material security and enduring aspirations of stability, middle classes emerge as a contradictory social formation whose strategies of reproduction are both enabled and constrained by authoritarian power. Drawing on Marxist theories of reproduction, Polanyi's analysis of social protection, Bourdieu's work on habitus and distinction, Weber's sociology of authority, and anthropological scholarship on governance and uncertainty, the article conceptualizes authoritarianism as a historically situated response to crises of reproduction. Through comparative illustrations from Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia, it shows how authoritarian governance reorganizes access to housing, education, employment, legality, and respectability – key infrastructures of middle-class life. The article contributes to dialectical anthropology by reframing authoritarianism as a dynamic field of class practice, contradiction, and struggle rather than a fixed political form.

Keywords: Middle class, Authoritarianism, Social reproduction, Moral economy, Political economy, Governance, Insecurity, Dialectical anthropology, Latin America, Africa, Southeast Asia

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1. Introduction

Across diverse geopolitical contexts, the consolidation of authoritarian governance has coincided with profound transformations in the material and symbolic conditions of middle-class life. Once positioned as the social bearer of political liberalization, economic mobility, and neoliberal optimism, middle classes today

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confront stagnating incomes, precarious employment, rising costs of social reproduction, and declining confidence in institutional guarantees. These conditions have unsettled earlier narratives that cast the middle class as a stable force for democratization and have instead foregrounded its ambivalent, and at times supportive, relationship to authoritarian power.

Anthropological scholarship has increasingly challenged the assumption that middle-class engagements with authoritarianism can be explained solely through ideology, political manipulation, or false consciousness. Rather, recent work emphasizes the everyday practices, material anxieties, and moral projects through which middle classes navigate uncertainty and attempt to secure continuity (Moleka, 2025a and 2025b). This article builds on that scholarship by arguing that authoritarianism should be understood not merely as a political regime but as a reproductive formation: a historically specific configuration of power that reorganizes the conditions under which social life is maintained, stabilized, and transmitted across generations.

From a Marxian perspective, reproduction has always been central to the analysis of class. Marx's critique of political economy demonstrates that capitalist accumulation depends not only on production but on the continuous reproduction of labor power, social relations, and class hierarchies (Marx, 1976; Marx, 1993). Contemporary transformations—financialization, austerity, privatization, and labor flexibilization—have intensified pressures on households, especially those positioned between capital and labor. Middle classes, neither owners of significant capital nor recipients of robust social protection, occupy a structurally exposed position within these dynamics (Wright, 1997; Poulantzas, 1978; Moleka, 2025c).

It is under these conditions of exposure that authoritarian governance gains renewed traction. Polanyi's concept of the "double movement" remains instructive here: when market logics threaten the social foundations of life, societies generate protective responses aimed at re-embedding economic processes within social control (Polanyi, 2001). Authoritarian regimes frequently present themselves as such protective responses, promising order, stability, and predictability in the face of disembedding forces. However, these promises are unevenly distributed and deeply classed. For middle classes, authoritarianism often offers selective protection—secured neighborhoods, disciplined labor markets, regulated access to legality and recognition—while simultaneously intensifying exclusion and coercion for others.

Anthropological analyses of governance and uncertainty further illuminate this dynamic. The Comaroffs (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2020) have shown how contemporary forms of rule increasingly operate through law, prediction, and bureaucratic abstraction, producing a politics of anticipation rather than redistribution. Authoritarian regimes mobilize these techniques to manage insecurity, framing coercion as administrative necessity and inequality as technical outcome. Middle-class actors frequently become both subjects and agents of these processes, participating in regulatory practices that promise insulation from risk while reinforcing hierarchical orders.

Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, distinction, and symbolic capital provide additional insight into why authoritarian protection resonates with middle-class strategies of reproduction. Middle-class security depends not only on income but on credentials, respectability, legality, and recognition—forms of capital that are deeply vulnerable to political and institutional instability (Bourdieu, 2018; Bourdieu, 1998). Authoritarian governance often reasserts clear classificatory boundaries and moral hierarchies, offering a sense of order that aligns with middle-class investments in predictability and merit, even as it narrows the space for political contestation.

From a Weberian perspective, this appeal can also be understood through the lens of authority and legitimacy. Bureaucratic rationality, rule-bound domination, and legal formalism—hallmarks of authoritarian governance—promise calculability and procedural clarity in contexts where democratic institutions are perceived as ineffective or corrupt (Weber, 1978). For middle classes whose livelihoods depend on institutional mediation, such promises can outweigh concerns about political freedom, at least temporarily.

This article advances a dialectical anthropology of authoritarianism by foregrounding these contradictions. Middle classes are neither passive victims nor straightforward beneficiaries of authoritarian rule. Their strategies of social reproduction—securing housing, education, employment, legality, and future prospects—draw them into complex relations with authoritarian power that oscillate between accommodation, complicity, and critique. By theorizing authoritarianism as a reproductive regime, the

article shifts the analytical focus from political attitudes to material practices and from regime typologies to lived social relations.

In doing so, it contributes to the aims of *Dialectical Anthropology* and to the present special issue by situating middle-class authoritarian entanglements within broader historical transformations of capitalism, governance, and social reproduction. Authoritarianism emerges not as an aberration but as a historically intelligible response to crises of continuity — one whose stability is always provisional and whose contradictions remain a potential site of struggle.

2. The Middle Class as a Contradictory Social Formation

Middle classes occupy a structurally ambivalent and historically contingent position, wedged between the pressures of capital accumulation and the uncertainties of labor markets. They are neither fully autonomous actors capable of shaping political and economic structures at will, nor entirely passive objects of state and market forces. Marx's relational approach to class highlights that class identity is not merely about property ownership or income brackets but about the position an actor occupies in the reproduction of social hierarchies (Marx, 1976; Marx, 1993).

In contemporary contexts, middle-class households are simultaneously producers of labor, consumers of marketized goods, and bearers of cultural capital, which produces a complex web of dependence, aspiration, and constraint (Wright, 1997; Burawoy, 1979).

This contradictory position generates inherent tensions. Middle-class households seek both stability and mobility, security and recognition, yet they are continuously exposed to market volatility, institutional erosion, and sociopolitical uncertainty (Poulantzas, 1978; Therborn, 2000). These tensions shape everyday strategies of reproduction, encompassing not only income generation but also investments in education, professional credentialing, consumption patterns, housing, and social comportment (Fernandes, 2011).

For example, in Latin America, urban middle-class families strategically invest in gated communities, private schooling, and informal networks of security to mediate exposure to crime, political instability, and state neglect (Ott, 2024; Goldstein, 2013; Auyero, 2001). Such practices reflect both compliance with and adaptation to broader authoritarian and neoliberal structures, illustrating that the middle class is a site of both domination and negotiation.

Bourdieu's notion of habitus and symbolic capital provides a lens for understanding how middle-class dispositions are structured by historical experience yet continuously reproduced through everyday practice (Bourdieu, 2018). Habitus captures the embodied, unconscious practices that structure aspirations and comportment, while symbolic capital reveals how social recognition, prestige, and legitimacy operate as critical resources. In authoritarian contexts, middle-class habitus is often attuned to moral codes, legality, and disciplined comportment, aligning with regime expectations while safeguarding social and economic positions. This alignment, however, is fraught: the very dispositions that enable compliance can also produce vulnerabilities, as shifts in political or economic authority may invalidate long-standing strategies of distinction and reproduction.

Ethnographic and comparative studies illustrate the contradictions inherent in middle-class life. In Southeast Asia, urban professionals simultaneously engage in entrepreneurial ventures, participate in state-regulated social programs, and cultivate networks of informal patronage to protect against economic precarity and political uncertainty (Ong, 2006). In South Africa, postapartheid middle-class households navigate bureaucratic and legal frameworks to secure property, education, and professional mobility, yet they remain exposed to structural inequalities and systemic failures (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2020).

Importantly, the contradictions of middle-class positioning are not merely material; they are deeply moral and affective. Anxiety over social reproduction, fear of downward mobility, and aspirations for security generate a repertoire of practices that may simultaneously reinforce authoritarian governance and produce spaces of subtle resistance. The middle class, therefore, operates as a contradictory social formation: it is both a beneficiary and a producer of the very systems that constrain its autonomy (Szoke et al., 2024). By theorizing these contradictions, dialectical anthropology illuminates the ways in which middle classes are actively implicated in the reproduction of social hierarchies, yet remain sites of potential instability and transformation.

3. Disembedding, Insecurity, and the Politics of Protection

Middle-class life under contemporary authoritarian regimes is profoundly shaped by processes of economic, social, and institutional disembedding. Following Polanyi (2001), disembedding occurs when market logics, financialization, and neoliberal reforms uncouple economic activity from the social structures that historically mediated risk and stability. In such contexts, the state and market fail to provide reliable frameworks for social reproduction, leaving middle-class households exposed to volatility in housing, employment, education, and access to legal protections (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2020).

Authoritarian regimes often intervene in these moments of structural uncertainty by offering selective protection, presenting themselves as guarantors of stability, order, and predictability. Such interventions are not neutral: they privilege specific social strata – typically middle-class and professional households – while simultaneously regulating, surveilling, or marginalizing other groups. As such, the middle class is positioned in a contradictory role: it benefits from state protection yet becomes a mediator of authoritarian authority through everyday practices of compliance, negotiation, and surveillance.

Anthropological scholarship on uncertainty and governance provides further insight into how middle-class actors navigate these conditions. Li (2007) and Ong (2006) emphasize the calculative strategies individuals develop in response to insecurity, including participation in formal and informal networks of protection, strategic compliance with bureaucratic rules, and selective investment in moral or symbolic capital. For example, in Southeast Asian cities, middle-class households rely on informal networks to complement state services, navigating both the promises and constraints of authoritarian governance to secure educational and professional futures (Ong, 2006).

The politics of protection is deeply affective. Middle-class actors internalize both the anxiety generated by structural insecurity and the moral narratives propagated by authoritarian regimes. Security, order, and predictability are not simply material goods; they are moral and symbolic resources that confer legitimacy and respectability (Bourdieu, 1998; Mateescu *et al.*, 2019). Compliance with authoritarian rationalities thus becomes both a practical strategy for maintaining reproduction and an affective practice of self-discipline, aligning household aspirations with the regime's moral and bureaucratic order.

In these conditions, authoritarianism can be conceptualized as a reproductive regime in Polanyian terms: it actively organizes the conditions under which middle-class households can sustain themselves and transmit resources and status across generations. Yet this arrangement is inherently fragile and uneven. Access to protection is contingent on social networks, professional credentials, and moral comportment, leaving some households more vulnerable than others and reproducing existing social hierarchies. Anthropology's emphasis on lived experience, moral economies, and everyday negotiation illuminates these contradictions, showing how middle-class strategies of survival, aspiration, and recognition are intimately intertwined with authoritarian governance.

4. Negotiating Uncertainty: Middle-Class Strategies

Middle-class households navigate authoritarian uncertainty through a sophisticated set of strategies aimed at mitigating risk and securing social reproduction. These strategies operate at the intersection of material necessity, moral reasoning, and anticipatory planning, reflecting both practical and symbolic dimensions of middle-class life. Drawing on Ong's (2006) notion of "graduated sovereignty" and Li's (2007) work on governmentality and calculative practices, middleclass actors are engaged in constant negotiation with authoritarian structures, seeking to stabilize their economic, social, and moral positions.

4.1. Formal Compliance and Institutional Navigation

One primary mode of engagement is formal compliance with authoritarian regulations and bureaucratic procedures. This includes meticulous adherence to tax laws, professional licensing requirements, and educational credentialing systems. Such practices not only secure access to material resources and social privileges but also cultivate recognition and legitimacy within the broader social hierarchy (Bourdieu, 1998). Compliance is therefore both a strategic adaptation and a moral performance, signaling discipline, respectability, and competence.

For example, in Latin American urban contexts, middle-class families invest in private schools and extracurricular programs that align with state-sanctioned notions of excellence and civic responsibility. These investments are not purely educational but also performative acts of social positioning, reinforcing both status and access to protective networks (Goldstein, 2013; Fernandes, 2011). Similarly, in Southeast Asia, households comply with bureaucratic requirements while simultaneously cultivating relationships with local officials or intermediaries to anticipate and mitigate the effects of arbitrary enforcement (Ong, 2006).

4.2. Informal Networks and Patronage

In parallel with formal compliance, middle-class households cultivate informal networks and patronage relations to navigate uncertainty. These networks—ranging from neighborhood associations and professional guilds to kinship and friendship ties—serve as buffers against economic shocks, social instability, and bureaucratic opacity (Auyero, 2001). Participation in these networks reflects pragmatic engagement with authoritarian power, allowing households to access resources, anticipate risks, and negotiate protections that formal institutions may fail to provide.

Such strategies are not merely tactical; they are embedded within cultural logics of reciprocity and moral obligation, where compliance and networking are mutually reinforcing. Households invest time and resources in maintaining these ties, cultivating a sense of anticipatory social security that compensates for gaps in formal governance. In doing so, middle classes become both recipients and producers of social order, actively participating in the reproduction of hierarchical and authoritarian structures while simultaneously protecting their own continuity (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2020).

4.3. Moral and Affective Calculations

Middle-class strategies are deeply informed by moral and affective considerations. Anxiety over social reproduction—concerns about children's education, property security, and professional trajectories—drives a calculative attentiveness to risk, shaping everyday decision-making (Li, 2007; Therborn, 2000). These affective dispositions intersect with political rationalities, such that compliance, networking, and investment strategies are infused with moral logic: responsible households are those that anticipate instability, exercise foresight, and cultivate resilience within the parameters set by authoritarian regimes.

In effect, middle-class households operate within a dialectical tension: their practices simultaneously mitigate vulnerability and reinforce systems of control. Investments in security, education, and credentialing protect families while legitimating governance structures that sustain inequality and selective protection (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2020). Anxiety, foresight, and moral calculation thus become tools through which middle classes mediate structural uncertainty while navigating complex social hierarchies.

4.4. Spatial and Temporal Strategies

Middle-class strategies also encompass spatial and temporal dimensions. Spatially, households seek to inhabit areas that combine safety, social homogeneity, and access to high-quality services, producing territorialized zones of protection such as gated communities or regulated urban districts (Goldstein, 2013). Temporally, households engage in long-term planning, anticipating shifts in labor markets, regulatory frameworks, and economic cycles to sustain reproduction over generational horizons (Wright, 1997).

These strategies are collective, anticipatory, and adaptive, reflecting the inherently contradictory position of the middle class. Households are agents of their own protection while simultaneously embedded within broader authoritarian systems, creating networks, temporal plans, and moral routines that secure continuity but reproduce hierarchies of privilege and exclusion.

4.5. Dialectical Implications

From a dialectical perspective, middle-class strategies illustrate the contradictory nature of social reproduction under authoritarianism. By engaging both formal and informal mechanisms, households produce security and stability, yet in doing so they legitimize the very regimes that constrain broader freedoms and equality. This duality reflects the central insight of dialectical anthropology: social formations are never monolithic; they are sites of tension, negotiation, and potential transformation (Burawoy, 1979; Comaroff and Comaroff,

2020). Understanding middle-class strategies requires attention to material conditions, moral reasoning, and affective dispositions, all of which coalesce to shape the reproduction of social life under authoritarian pressures.

5. The Moral Economies of Middle-Class Reproduction

Middle-class strategies of reproduction are not reducible to economic rationality alone; they are deeply embedded in moral frameworks, affective investments, and cultural norms. Drawing on the concept of moral economy (Thompson, 1971; Scott, 1985) and its anthropological extensions, this section examines how middle-class actors under authoritarian regimes negotiate obligations, entitlements, and social recognition while pursuing continuity and security. These moral economies are dialectical: they mediate between personal aspirations, social hierarchies, and political authority, producing practices that simultaneously stabilize and challenge authoritarian structures.

5.1. Aspirations, Anxiety, and Ethical Practice

Middle-class reproduction is infused with aspiration and anxiety. Households invest heavily in education, housing, and social networks, seeking not only material security but also moral legitimacy and social esteem (Bourdieu, 2018). Such investments are shaped by anticipatory ethics: decisions are guided by what actors believe they *ought* to do to secure their children's futures, maintain household dignity, and fulfill social obligations.

For instance, in urban Latin America, families routinely allocate scarce resources to private tutoring, extracurricular programs, and social clubs, not merely as economic investments but as performative enactments of moral responsibility and civility (Goldstein, 2013; Fernandes, 2011). These practices communicate compliance with societal norms and align household aspirations with perceived authoritarian expectations of order, discipline, and merit.

5.2. Debt, Credit, and Temporal Morality

Financialization and neoliberal reforms have expanded the role of debt and credit in middleclass life, producing new temporal moralities around obligation, risk, and future planning. Borrowing to secure education, housing, or small business ventures is both a material necessity and a moral undertaking, as households manage obligations to creditors, kin, and the state (Desmond, 2017). Debt becomes a medium through which future-oriented reproduction is attempted, linking economic behavior to moral accountability and social visibility.

This moralization of finance creates contradictions: households incur risk to reproduce social positions, yet the very systems that facilitate reproduction—credit markets, privatized services, and regulated labor markets—also expose them to precarity and potential failure. In authoritarian contexts, where legal and institutional protection may be selective, these contradictions are intensified.

5.3. Consumption, Distinction, and Symbolic Capital

Middle-class reproduction is also enacted through consumption practices that produce and signal distinction. Drawing on Bourdieu (2018 and 1998), households strategically use housing, clothing, schooling, and leisure to communicate social status, moral propriety, and cultural competence. Consumption thus functions as a form of symbolic reproduction, reinforcing both household security and position within broader hierarchies.

Under authoritarian governance, consumption patterns intersect with moral and political logics. Middle-class engagement with gated communities, private schools, and selective urban districts simultaneously insulates households from perceived threats and legitimates existing hierarchies, reinforcing the regime's moral and bureaucratic order (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2020). These choices demonstrate the entanglement of economic, social, and political reproduction in everyday life.

5.4. Work, Labor, and the Ethics of Effort

Labor is a central domain through which middle-class households negotiate reproduction, particularly under regimes where formal protection is partial or uneven. Professionalization, credentialing, and "good work" are not only economic imperatives but moral performances, reflecting conscientiousness, diligence, and civic

propriety (Burawoy, 1979). Households invest in human capital to secure both material returns and social recognition, producing an ethic of effort that aligns with authoritarian narratives of productivity, discipline, and meritocracy.

Yet this ethic is inherently contradictory. While labor provides access to security and social capital, it also reproduces inequalities and deepens dependence on authoritarian structures. Middleclass actors are thus caught in a dialectical tension: their strategies aim to safeguard continuity while simultaneously stabilizing the conditions of their own constraint (Wright, 1997; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2020).

5.5. Dialectics of Moral Economies

Overall, middle-class moral economies under authoritarianism illustrate the dialectical interplay of freedom and constraint, aspiration and anxiety, compliance and resistance. Households actively reproduce social hierarchies through investments in education, consumption, labor, and social networks, yet these practices are shaped by structural vulnerabilities and ethical imperatives. Anthropology's attention to everyday moral reasoning, affective labor, and anticipatory strategies allows us to see authoritarian regimes not merely as repressive structures but as fields of negotiation, where middle-class actors produce both stability and the potential for transformation.

By analyzing moral economies in tandem with structural conditions, we see how authoritarian governance and middle-class reproduction are mutually constitutive, revealing the contradictions that make authoritarian orders simultaneously resilient and fragile. Dialectical anthropology thus offers a framework for understanding the temporal, moral, and social dynamics of reproduction, highlighting the ambivalent role of the middle class as both stabilizer and potential disruptor of authoritarian rule.

6. Resistance, Contestation, and Transformative Potentials

Middle-class life under authoritarianism is not reducible to passive compliance or uncritical acquiescence. While households participate in strategies that stabilize and reproduce social hierarchies, these same strategies can generate sites of contestation, negotiation, and subtle resistance. Resistance in this context is dialectical: it emerges from within the conditions of constraint and is often entangled with the very structures it seeks to challenge. Anthropological perspectives highlight that everyday practices, moral economies, and affective investments are simultaneously instruments of social reproduction and potential levers for transformation (Scott, 1985; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2020).

6.1. Everyday Forms of Negotiation

Resistance often manifests as everyday negotiation, a concept rooted in James Scott's (1985) framework of "hidden transcripts." Middle-class actors leverage discretion, bureaucratic knowledge, and social networks to navigate authoritarian constraints, sometimes subtly subverting or circumventing rules while appearing compliant. For example, families may prioritize educational paths, housing choices, or professional trajectories that insulate them from direct state interference yet subtly challenge inequitable distribution of resources or legitimacy (Fernandes, 2011).

These everyday tactics are neither fully public nor overtly political; they operate within shadows of power, making resistance contingent, context-sensitive, and morally coded. They highlight that middle-class reproduction is strategically adaptive: households negotiate risk while cultivating opportunities for upward mobility and ethical self-assertion.

6.2. Symbolic and Moral Contestation

Resistance is also symbolic. Practices of consumption, cultural participation, and professional comportment can function as markers of moral and social critique, signaling dissent from authoritarian prescriptions even while complying with outward appearances of order (Bourdieu, 2018; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2020). In Latin American and Southeast Asian urban contexts, for instance, households may engage in selective patronage, support civil society initiatives, or maintain civic networks that foster autonomy, knowledge, and social capital outside direct state control (Ong, 2006; Auyero, 2001).

These symbolic acts of contestation reveal that middle-class reproduction is moral work as much as material work: actors assert claims to legitimacy, fairness, and recognition while navigating authoritarian structures. Resistance and reproduction are thus intertwined, highlighting the contradictory nature of middle-class positioning within authoritarian regimes.

6.3. Collective Action and Institutional Engagement

Beyond everyday negotiation, middle-class actors sometimes participate in more collective forms of contestation. Professional associations, neighborhood councils, and civic organizations can operate as mediating institutions, translating individual anxieties and aspirations into coordinated action (Therborn, 2000). Engagement with such institutions often seeks to reclaim accountability, influence policy, or stabilize social reproduction, demonstrating that middle-class agency is exercised both individually and collectively (Murumba and Angela, 2024).

Collective action is fraught with tension: participation can legitimize authoritarian governance, as it channels energies into formally sanctioned or technically proceduralized arenas rather than radical transformation. Yet, these very channels can also cultivate capacities for critical consciousness, ethical deliberation, and incremental change, providing seeds for broader social contestation.

6.4. Contingency and Transformation

A dialectical lens foregrounds the contingency of resistance. Middle-class strategies of survival and reproduction are conditioned by structural constraints and political context, yet they are not deterministic. Moments of crisis—economic shocks, political scandals, social mobilizations—can reconfigure the field of possibilities, transforming everyday negotiation into explicit challenge (Wright, 1997; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2020). In these moments, moral economies, affective investments, and accumulated social capital converge, producing openings for experimentation, critique, and innovation.

Anthropology's contribution is to render these contradictions visible, documenting both the practices that stabilize authoritarian orders and those that harbor transformative potential. By situating middle-class reproduction within a dialectics of constraint and possibility, we understand authoritarianism as neither monolithic nor inevitable: its reproduction depends on continuous negotiation, moral reasoning, and affective labor.

6.5. Implications for Dialectical Anthropology

The study of resistance and contestation underscores the necessity of dialectical anthropology for understanding middle-class life under authoritarianism. It highlights how power, morality, and reproduction intersect to produce ambiguous terrains of compliance and subversion. Middle-class actors are both participants in and potential disruptors of authoritarian regimes, embodying the contradictions inherent in governance, social reproduction, and moral economy.

In sum, authoritarian governance and middle-class life are mutually constitutive, but within this mutuality lie latent potentials for transformation. Resistance is embedded in everyday practices, collective strategies, and moral economies, and anthropology's attentiveness to these dynamics illuminates how social reproduction can be a site of both constraint and creative possibility.

6.6. Crisis Moments and Strategic Transformation

Resistance is contingent and situational. Economic shocks, political scandals, or sudden policy shifts create openings for middle-class actors to challenge authoritarian arrangements more explicitly (Wright, 1997; Fernandes, 2011). During such crises, everyday negotiation can escalate into public dissent, legal contestation, or mobilization through professional and civic networks. These moments illustrate the transformative potential embedded in everyday reproduction strategies, revealing that authoritarianism's stability depends on continuous negotiation rather than coercion alone.

6.7. Dialectical Implications for Anthropology

A dialectical anthropology emphasizes the mutual constitution of constraint and agency. Middle-class

reproduction, compliance, and resistance are inseparable, and their entanglement shapes authoritarian governance itself. Anthropology's task is to render these contradictions visible, documenting how everyday practices, moral reasoning, symbolic capital, and institutional engagement create both stability and potential disruption. By situating middle-class life within the broader structures of capitalism, governance, and social reproduction, this approach illuminates the latent capacities for negotiation, critique, and social transformation embedded in everyday existence under authoritarianism.

7. Contradiction, Praxis, and the Dialectics of Middle-Class Engagement

Dialectical anthropology emphasizes that social domination inherently produces contradictions and openings for praxis (Postone, 1993; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2020). Middle-class households under authoritarianism exemplify this dynamic: their position as both beneficiaries and producers of hierarchical order generates tensions that structure everyday life, moral reasoning, and political engagement.

7.1. Contradictions of Compliance and Subversion

Middle-class actors navigate authoritarian governance through strategies that simultaneously stabilize and contest power. Compliance with bureaucratic, moral, and legal norms enables households to secure resources and protect social status. Yet, these same strategies cultivate awareness of the system's limits, revealing opportunities for subversion, negotiation, or advocacy (Scott, 1985). For example, selective engagement with state programs or participation in professional associations can both reproduce regime authority and create channels for incremental reform.

7.2. Everyday Praxis

Praxis is visible in the embodied, quotidian practices of households: negotiating schooling, maintaining social networks, and cultivating moral and symbolic capital to mitigate uncertainty (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2020). These actions are simultaneously defensive and generative: they ensure reproduction while sustaining capacities for critique and alternative imaginaries (Moleka, 2025d and 2025e). Dialectical anthropology thus reframes middle-class survival strategies as sites of potential transformation, not merely accommodation.

7.3. Collective and Institutional Dimensions

Beyond the household, contradictions manifest in collective and institutional engagements. Middle-class actors may participate in professional organizations, neighborhood associations, or civic initiatives to negotiate access to resources and influence policy outcomes (Fernandes, 2011; Ong, 2006). While these engagements often legitimize authoritarian structures, they also cultivate critical consciousness and strategic capacities that can challenge or reshape regimes of governance over time.

7.4. Moral Economy and Ethical Reflexivity

Resistance and praxis are intertwined with moral and affective reasoning. Anxiety, care, and aspiration are central to understanding middle-class engagement with authoritarianism (Auyero, 2001). Households' ethical investments—such as ensuring children's education, protecting family networks, and maintaining social recognition—mediate both compliance and critique, illustrating how material, moral, and symbolic dimensions converge in dialectical practice.

7.5. Implications for Anthropological Analysis

Anthropology's task is to document and interpret these contradictions in real time, revealing how middle-class actors are embedded within authoritarian power while simultaneously producing spaces for negotiation, critique, and transformation. The dialectical perspective underscores that authoritarian stability depends not on coercion alone, but on the ongoing negotiation of reproduction, recognition, and moral legitimacy (Postone, 1993; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2020).

8. Conclusions: Middle Classes as Agents of Reproduction and Transformation

This article has argued that middle-class life under authoritarianism is shaped by structural ambivalence,

moral calculation, and everyday negotiation. Far from passive beneficiaries or simple collaborators, middle-class households occupy a contradictory social formation: their strategies of reproduction simultaneously sustain authoritarian governance and cultivate capacities for critique, subversion, and incremental transformation.

By conceptualizing authoritarianism as a reproductive regime, the analysis shifts focus from regime typologies or ideology to the material, moral, and symbolic practices through which households navigate insecurity, pursue stability, and transmit social and cultural resources across generations. Anthropological attention to these practices illuminates how middle-class anxieties, ambitions, and strategies are deeply intertwined with broader structures of capitalism, governance, and inequality.

Ultimately, this dialectical approach emphasizes the contingency and instability of authoritarian arrangements. Middle-class compliance is neither total nor permanent; contradictions are embedded in everyday life and reproduce openings for negotiation and transformation. Anthropology's contribution lies in making visible these tensions, tracing how the management of risk, reproduction of status, and cultivation of symbolic capital can become levers of social change, offering insights into both the resilience and the fragility of authoritarian governance.

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