

# The Cost of Leaving

## A Cultural Sociology of Exiled Syrian Intellectuals

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## Abstract

### The Cost of Leaving: A Cultural Sociology of Exiled Syrian Intellectuals

Zeina Al Azmeh

This dissertation examines exiled Syrian intellectuals' interaction with the 2011 revolutionary movement and the social phenomena they have been forming during that process. Following a two-tiered research question, it investigates how exiled Syrian intellectuals contributed to the construction of meaning surrounding socio-political transformation and the cultural trauma unfolding around it, and what sociological dynamics have impacted this meaning-making process. Methodologically, it triangulates data from document analysis, semi-structured interviews with 30 Syrian writers and artists living in Paris and Berlin, and participant observation. Theoretically, it presents a novel framework for a *critical* decolonial cultural sociology, aiming to open a new research front in the enterprise of decolonising trauma studies by deepening our understanding of the role of intellectuals in cultural trauma construction and its predicaments in peripheral and diasporic contexts.

The dissertation is organised into three empirical chapters. The first chapter examines internal social dynamics within the field of exiled intellectuals in Paris and Berlin. It suggests that intellectual self-positioning was influenced by material and symbolic factors, notably competition over symbolic status built around field-specific power structures such as an individual's sacrifices for the movement. But it was also influenced by politically rooted psychological traumas. This is something that the sociology of intellectuals and intellectual positioning theory, in particular, has not paid attention to, and it is likely to be specific to the context of war and revolution. The chapter observes how the diversity of drivers (material, symbolic and psychological) for intellectual positioning contributed to the formation of a fragmented field constituting mutually antagonistic intellectual collectives organised around two lines of tension: structuralist materialist and culturalist. Further divisions were found around stances vis-à-vis armament, transitional justice and political Islam.

The second chapter explores how exiled Syrian intellectuals relate to their host countries. It shows that while the Syrian cause remained at the centre of exiled intellectuals' interventions, it was now viewed through a more universalist-cum-Eurocentric lens. This cosmopolitan outlook made state-led integration policies and exaggerated suppositions about cultural divergence seem 'Orientalist', 'inflammatory' and 'ethnonationalist'. But while they presented a universalising trauma narrative that connected the Syrian tragedy with other world events or discourses, they often reflected a sense of exceptionalism vis-à-vis the tragic nature of their trauma, particularly concerning its political outcome. This sense of exceptionalism and the perceived responsibility of the international community in it fostered multi-layered, often conflicted, attitudes and views toward host societies where inner tensions between referentiality and condemnation were loosely negotiated. A potential paradigm shift is observable in the work of diasporic intellectuals. Heretofore

characterised by a focus on how the global periphery, and its intellectuals, are inhabited by a postcolonial hermeneutics which focuses on the Western 'Other', it is now characterised by a change in the direction of focus from a *politics of being perceived* (how the West sees the Third World or influences its self-perception) to a *politics of perceiving* (how the Third World and its intellectuals see and make ethical judgements about the West).

The third chapter looks at how Syrian intellectuals in exile position themselves in relation to their home society. It suggests that after the 2011 revolution, particularly after its violent turn and the first wave of exile, the enlightening role of the Syrian intellectual was seriously questioned, and an idea/fantasy of radical embeddedness within society began to emerge within the exilic intellectual milieu. Intellectuals' stance towards their home publics became increasingly marked by a combined sense of inferiority, indebtedness, and dependency. Additionally, the increasingly important and urgent role of trauma narration called for identification with the suffering masses. As a result, there was a tendency to give up any enlightening role and identify with 'the people' or align with what they perceived to be their general inclinations. Such alignment/identification sometimes included anti-intellectual sentiments, resulting in a self-contempt that may be understood as an extreme form of epistemic egalitarianism.

The dissertation shows that by diverting their attention to trauma narration upon exile, intellectuals' identification with the suffering masses became so complete that it diluted their shared identity.

Thus, the intellectual's assimilation within the masses, or what I refer to as a radically embedded position, obscured the political responsibilities that intellectuals were once thought to bear. In the case of Syria, this resulted in a weakened discursive influence and abstinence from institutional politics. In its extreme form, where intellectuals not only felt that they were equal but that they were inferior to 'the people', embeddedness was a hindrance to praxis. Not only did intellectuals resign any leadership responsibilities based on this positioning, but they became followers of public sentiment, offering uncritical solidarity towards what they perceived to be the people's will. Paired with a politically turbulent context in grave need of clear, timely, critical and performatively potent intellectual interventions, radical embeddedness may be seen as a hindrance to the movement in that it politically neutralised an important discursive current, the secular democratic, all too soon and left the opposition even more susceptible to competing discursive currents supported by geopolitically motivated forces.

Theoretically, the dissertation sets out the basic principles of a new decolonial cultural sociology. Initially, this is centred around the notion of theorising cultural trauma from the global periphery in ways that inform, supplement and re-examine 'hegemonic trauma theory' and its claims to universality. Similarly approaching other frameworks within cultural sociology from this vantage point, the new paradigm can be described as decolonial. It is also critical in that it deviates from standard methods in cultural sociology towards a *theoretically contrapuntal framework*. If cultural sociology aims to construct thick descriptions of structures of meaning, i.e. 'structural hermeneutics' that explain social

phenomena, it follows that a critique of the emerging meanings is pointless since the purpose of thick descriptions (e.g. interview data) is not to describe objective truths about reality but to depict specific reconstructions of reality (e.g. how interviewees experience, feel about and act towards that reality). However, this new approach examines such data critically. It may sometimes point out inconsistencies or misconstructions in interviewees' recollection or reconstruction of reality. By highlighting and analysing such inconsistencies or misconstructions, it seeks sociological explanations or inferences about the field under examination, its power dynamics and its actors' motivations, emotions and self-narratives. From a cultural sociological perspective, this seems pointless – after all, structural hermeneutics is about what meanings and structures of meaning are operating within a field, not the extent to which these meanings are valid or 'truthful'. However, in pointing to such inconsistencies, one permits inquiries into the motivations and power dynamics that might nudge actors towards them. In other words, while methodologically speaking, interviewees' statements are used as evidence of their experiences, representations and actions, *not as evidence of the truth* about what is happening, their statements are also critiqued scrutinised in the sense of making claims for potential discrepancies between what is said and what the researcher believes to be an empirical and demonstrable truth. Such interjections can be construed as a methodological device aiming to unearth sociological phenomena signalled by the discrepancies.





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*To Alaa, the sail and the anchor, and Fay and Lea, the light in my eyes, for the enormous sacrifice of uprooting their lives, schools, career, friendships so I can do this; for your love, resilience and awesomeness, I am so deeply grateful. To my supervisor Patrick Baert, for his ingenuity, support, mentorship and this life-changing opportunity, I am eternally thankful. To Abia, the source and the inspiration whose visits were precious oases of rest, comfort and connection, thank you! To Hazem, for that decades-long ever stimulating conversation and for much needed existential optimism. To my friends Zeina Hasna, Wesam Asali, Maria Aquino Pérez, Hana Sleiman, Janani Ambikapathi, Yasmina Chami, Jaber, Tina, Nadia, Eileen and countless others, this would have been so grim without you. To the Sociology Writing Up Group and the Modern Middle East Seminar, your feedback has been enormously helpful. To my dear friends in the online writing group, this was much more than a lockdown writing support group. To Read, Rasha Mohammad and Liwaa for their much-needed hospitality and friendship during fieldwork. Finally and most importantly, to my participants whose words and ideas are the beating heart of this dissertation, this work is also yours.*



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## Introduction

In March 2011, peaceful demonstrations broke out in the south of Syria protesting the arrest and torture of a number of boys who had spray-painted dissident slogans on a school wall. The regime responded to the demonstrations with extreme violence killing some of the unarmed protesters which resulted in the rapid diffusion of protests around the country demanding Assad to step down. By July 2011, hundreds of thousands of Syrians were taking to the streets across the country. Predictably, (see Kalyvas, 2012, p. 660) the more violent and indiscriminate state violence against these protestors became, the more civilians were likely to seek protection from - and sometimes join - militarised factions. Indiscriminate violence generated anger rather than fear (see also Della Porta, 2017) and defecting soldiers started introducing arms to the opposition while hundreds of soldiers were executed for refusing to fire on protestors. Meanwhile negotiations between the opposition and the regime were stalled and protestors increasingly started to believe that taking up arms was both justified and necessary in the face of the regime's use of lethal force. It is in this way that a peaceful movement became militarised. Within a year, political impasses resulted in the fragmentation of the opposition, the armament of the movement, and ultimately the onset of a proxy war (Donker, 2017; Della Porta, 2017).

It is clear that both the revolutionary spirit in which the graffiti was painted and the excessive violence with which the regime responded were influenced by fast-evolving events in Tunisia and Egypt which had succeeded in toppling long-standing dictatorships in these countries. But they were also an explosion of rage that had been accumulating for decades in growing economic, political, and environmental hardship under one of the century's most oppressive dictatorships.

With the intensification of state violence, the emergence of Islamist actors in the war, and consecutive disappointments on the political arena<sup>1</sup>, the hopeful enthusiasm and faith in the potency of popular power that had marked the early months of the uprising were gradually tainted with despair, cynicism, and cavernous hopelessness. As a result, many Syrians fled the country, some escaping persecution, others evading the hardships of war. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 4.8 million Syrians fled to Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and Iraq; 6.6 million are internally displaced within Syria; and about one million have sought asylum in Europe (UNHCR, 2016).

The role of Syrian intellectuals and artists in the uprising was debated both in private social circles and in the public sphere. Recognising their influence, the regime tried to recruit many of them - particularly those popularised through the TV industry - for a public campaign intended to legitimate its narrative: the uprising was the result of a 'foreign conspiracy' and protestors were predominantly mercenaries or terrorists. This resulted in dramatic polarisation among writers, actors, and artists who were under escalating pressure to make

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<sup>1</sup> For example, a series of vetoed United Nations Security Council resolutions and Iranian and Russian military interventions

their political positions and allegiances public<sup>2</sup>. Nihad Sirees<sup>3</sup> described how the government had been asking intellectuals and artists to participate in television interviews aimed at garnering their symbolic capital to delegitimise protests. Knowing the consequences of refusal, it was when he started receiving such interview requests that he decided to leave the country (Personal communication, 2018). Others, like Amer Matar<sup>4</sup>, were arrested several times before being able to leave the country. In a June 2015 report, the Syrian Network for Human Rights reported that 22 artists have been killed in Syria and 57 arrested or kidnapped since March 2011. The organisation also said reports of violence and crimes against artists peaked in 2011 and 2012 but have since dropped. It attributed this decline to a decrease in the level of productivity and activity of creative people or to their migration outside of Syria (Bailey, 2016, pp. 61-62). No statistics on killed or imprisoned writers are available.

Indeed, as Mohammad Abou Laban<sup>5</sup> pointed out (personal communication, 2018), 'with the Islamisation of the revolution, almost all intellectuals felt the need to flee, even those who

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<sup>2</sup> Some sided against the protests and offered public performances in which they expressed distrust in the movement or cautioned against 'the conspiracy' echoing the regime's rhetoric though not necessarily siding with it, a well-known example is poet Nazih Abu Afash's reading in Al Madina theatre in Beirut on March 2011. Others had to flee the country under conditions of urgency and at the risk of facing arrest.

<sup>3</sup> Nihad Sirees is a novelist and screen writer. He is a participant in this study. Born in Aleppo in 1950, he studied engineering at the University of Aleppo. He emerged as a fiction writer in the 1980s, and has since written novels, plays, and TV drama series scripts. Among his notable works are the historical novel *The North Winds* and the popular TV drama *The Silk Market* which has been translated for screening in English, Persian and German. He also wrote a TV series about the American Lebanese writer Kahlil Gibran. Banned in Syria, his novel *The Silence and the Roar* was translated into German, French and English and other European languages. His second novel *States of Passion* was translated into English by Max Weiss and published by Pushkin Press in 2018. In the wake of the Arab Spring, Sirees was targeted by the Assad regime's heightened surveillance. As a result, he went into exile in 2012, initially in Egypt and later in Berlin where he still resides.

<sup>4</sup> Amer Matar is a journalist and human rights activist. He is a participant in this study. Born in Raqqa in 1987, he studied journalism at Damascus University and has been working as a journalist since 2002 writing features and corresponding for leading Arabic language newspapers including *Al-Arabiya* and *Annahar*. Has was also a cultural correspondent for the newspaper *Al-Hayat* in Damascus. In 2010, he co-founded a freedom-of-the-press organization called *Al-Schari* or *The Street* which began to document the Syrian Uprising on film producing broadcasts for *Al-Jazeera*, *Al-Arabiya* and *France24*. In 2011, he codirected the documentary film (*Azadi*) which follows the daily events of the Syrian Uprising in the Kurdish region of northern Syria winning him distinctions at the Rotterdam Film Festival. He was arrested twice by the Syrian secret police because of his journalistic work where he was interrogated, tortured and accused of 'spreading false news and thereby undermining national morale'. With the help of the Heinrich Böll Foundation, he was able to flee Syria in 2012 where he became a recipient of the PEN Writers in Exile fellowship until September 2015. His texts have been translated into German in two anthologies: *Syrien. Der schwierige Weg in die Freiheit* or *Syria. The Hard Road to Freedom* (2012) and *Fremde Heimat. Texte aus dem Exil* or *Foreign Homeland. Texts from Exile* (2013). Amer Matar is a co-organizer of the "Syrian Mobile Phone Festival".

<sup>5</sup> Mohammad Abou Laban is a Palestinian-Syrian screenwriter, poet, playwright and journalist. He is a participant in this study. Born in Damascus in 1976, he was educated in Philosophy and Theatre Studies in Damascus where he worked on various TV films, adaptations and drama series' in addition to collaborating on several documentaries. He moved to Madrid in 2005 working as a journalist, broadcaster and editor for the

had insisted that as intellectuals they can only work effectively from within Syria'. By September 2016, there were more than 300,000 cumulative Syrian asylum applications in Germany, making it the top receiving country in Europe (European University Institute, 2016). France took far fewer; a little over 3,500 applications were approved (UNHCR, 2016). However, the proportion of writers and artists who settled in Paris was significant (Salem, 2016) as was that of those in Berlin. This may have been facilitated by strategies such as issuing Syrian artists entry visas into France for cultural events as early as May 2011 (Al-Yasiri, 2015) or increasing residencies for Syrian writers and artists in Berlin (Allianz Cultural Foundation, 2016). Detailed socio-demographic statistics on Syrian refugee numbers are not available but the relatively high concentration of intellectuals in Paris and Berlin is suggested both by word of mouth and by the Syrian cultural scenes that have since emerged in these two cities.

### **Research problem, aims, and objectives**

This study examines how Syrian intellectuals<sup>6</sup>, now in exile, have been interacting with social, cultural, and political change in their country since the 2011 uprising. It asks several questions: What contextual and relational factors have impacted upon their meaning construction processes? How has the movement itself and the traumas associated with it, including exile, influenced intellectual praxis? And why has the discursive field they shaped become increasingly weaker in its ideational and political impact?

These complex questions coincide with an already gloomy global outlook: a 'crisis of critical faith' symptomatic of the waning of millennial aspirations (Michael, 2016) and the sad end of 'the romantic comedy of global emancipation' (Scott, 2005). In light of this historical backdrop, underlying all the above is the question: how does living in a discursive field tinged with little historical hope impact the role of critical intellectuals, particularly for a generation for whom such hope was briefly revived by the revolutionary moment of 2011 only to be quickly and violently crushed. One must remember with June Edmunds and Bryan Turner (2005, p. 575) that 'generations from the "margins" may be out-of-phase with mainstream generations'. Thus, hope in the possibility of change is not out of reach for all intellectuals everywhere. In fact, 2011 proved, if briefly, that it was not. It is true that the social location of intellectuals is important. But their generational politics, including the

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Radio Nacional de España's Arabic section. His publications include four poetry collections: Exercises in Meaningfulness (2016); A Passer-by Turns (2009); Paradox (2008); In A While (2005) as well as the playscript The Last Lover (2008). He is co-founder and editor of the magazine A Syrious Look and the artistic director of the Syrian Mobile Film Festival.

<sup>6</sup> Following Bourdieu's idea that clear cut definitions of intellectuals end up 'destroying a central property of the intellectual field, namely, that it is the site of struggles over who does and does not belong to it' (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 4), I do not attempt to define the intellectual as an objective endeavour. While I have not attempted a clear definition of how intellectuals can be defined in the current cultural and historical context of Syrian society, for the purpose of sampling, a broad definition of the intellectual was adopted whereby an intellectual is an individual who creates knowledge, defined in its broadest sense as communicable ideas that convey cognitive value including the artistic, reasoned opinion as well as demonstrated fact.

place of hope within any given global generation, must be conceptualised from the standpoint of cultural globalisation (Edmunds & Turner, 2005).

Contemporary thinking about public intellectualism<sup>7</sup> is polarised between those ‘declinists’<sup>8</sup> who mourn a bygone time when intellectuals engaged with, and had an impact on, policy and those who celebrate the imminent renaissance of new forms of public intellectualism shaped by new technologies. Declinist concerns are not unfounded. In the democratic West, as Desch suggests (2016, p. 27), the mourned weakening of public intellectualism is sometimes attributed to democratic politics (more on this in Chapter Four). But equally under dictatorship public intellectuals have an arguably clearer and more urgent critical role to play and yet their influence is constrained by censorship, persecution, and the impossibility of participating (critically and independently) in political structures of power. None of this is new but it has been fundamentally altered by new modes of knowledge production and distribution, including the changing dynamics of discursive influence brought about by new media. This is particularly salient during episodes of contention and political change where apparatuses of repression are unsettled and the discursive acquires a heightened sense of urgency and significance.

One might then suggest that it is in the midst of traumatic historic events<sup>9</sup> that intellectuals can acquire a uniquely important role and influence. But even then, such influence is volatile and can quickly be lost as this study will show.

Although intellectuals gained unprecedented social status and discursive influence in the early months of the uprising, this sense of empowerment was quickly lost when competing discourses offered by other carrier groups (e.g. various Islamist as well as pro-regime discourses) had greater appeal to wide segments of the society. Furthermore, there is a danger to this empowerment-disempowerment process. Baert (2015) has argued, and this study illustrates, that the delegitimisation of one carrier group (in this case intellectuals) not only makes room for, but in fact *strengthens*, competing discourses and their carrier groups. This dynamic, as I will argue in the conclusion chapter, can be detrimental for both the revolutionary movement<sup>10</sup> and future societal healing prospects.

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<sup>7</sup> A public intellectual is a specific type of knowledge creator; one who addresses issues of social concern and engages with a broader public. Not sufficing with pursuing knowledge for its own sake nor with interaction with other intellectuals, a public intellectual presents and applies their knowledge to broader publics (Baert & Shipman, 2013, pp. 28-29).

<sup>8</sup> A trend in the sociology of intellectuals to suggest that since the 1980s the public intellectual has been in decline (e.g., Jacoby 2000). This proposition has been contested by more recent studies suggesting that there is little empirical evidence to support it (e.g., Collini 2006; Baert and Shipman 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Notably in revolutionary movements where new independent political structures can emerge, particularly in exile, and where there is clear intellectual purpose to fulfil

<sup>10</sup> For the purpose of this dissertation, revolutionary movement will refer to a ‘social movement that seeks, as a minimum, to overthrow the government or state’ (Goodwin & Jasper, 2009, p. 9). While the political semantics of the events which started in March 2011 in Syria are controversial and politically loaded (see Coombs, 2011), I draw interchangeably on the lexicon used in the ethnographic field as well as terms more commonly used in the Syrian dissident public sphere, referring to the event interchangeably as ‘revolutionary



This dissertation hopes to address these research problems from the perspective of the periphery by taking as its reference the Syrian event of 2011 and broadening the discussion to shed light on specificities of Third World intellectuals.

## Research question

The specific research question that arises from connecting these problems and objectives to the specific case under question is two tiered: 1. how have exiled Syrian intellectuals contributed to the construction of meaning surrounding socio-political transformation and the cultural trauma<sup>11</sup> that is unfolding around it and 2. what social dynamics have impacted this meaning-making process.

In investigating how intellectuals contribute to the construction of meaning, I seek answers for the following questions. Firstly, what are the key narratives emerging from the exilic intellectual milieu and how are they influenced by their socio-political context and by relationships? These relationships include those within the intellectual milieu, between exiled intellectuals<sup>12</sup> and their host societies, as well as between exiled intellectuals and their home society. Secondly, how do exiled intellectuals perceive their own role in the revolutionary process and how has any such role changed with migration and/or with the unfolding of the Syrian crisis? Thirdly, what is the relationship between exiled intellectuals' critical work and on-the-ground praxis? In other words, how does the construction of

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movement'; 'revolution'; 'uprising' and 'movement'. Despite its transformation into a proxy war, I avoid terms more commonly used in the media when referring to the emancipatory movement of 2011 itself. Drawing on the work of Fadi Bardawil (2016a), I avoid referring to the event as 'crisis,' or 'disaster' in order not to join those who write about the country 'as if Syria was struck by a natural calamity that destroyed it'. I also avoid the terms 'civil war,' or 'conflict,' so as not to 'obscure the differences between the scale and types of violence experienced by both parties' (ibid).

<sup>11</sup> By cultural trauma theory I refer to Jeffrey Alexander's proposition that trauma, in order to be experienced collectively and vicariously, must undergo a process of symbolic construction which narrates the horrendous event that the collectivity has been subjected to marking its consciousness and collective memory, and changing its future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways (Alexander, 2004, p. 1).

<sup>12</sup> My use of the term 'exiled intellectual' denotes a Syrian or Palestinian- Syrian intellectual who fled Syria before or after 2011 in order to escape violence or avoid political persecution. Some participants had been in living in Europe for personal reasons before 2011 but they are exiles in situ in as much as they can no longer return to Syria due to their political opinions. Having said that, I recognise that two of the study participants have taken that risk. They remain exiles in as much their visits were exactly that, risks taken.

My choice of the term 'exiled' (rather than 'displaced', 'refugee' or 'immigrant') owes to the literary undertones of the compound. Firstly, 'exiled-intellectual' has become part of an imaginary that builds on the experience of Jewish and Palestinian intelligentsia in the 40s, and 60s of the last century. Secondly, the term lends an 'ethos of dignity and autonomy not uncommon in the writings of exiles' (Halabi, 2017, p.100). And thirdly, it is better aligned with intellectuals' self-identification for while the term refugees evokes 'large herds of innocent and bewildered people requiring urgent international assistance', exile suggests a 'touch of solitude and spirituality' (Said, 2013, p. 181).

meaning relate to the performance of meaning and how does it affect and reflect exiled intellectuals' own sense of agency? Lastly, how do experiences of exile impact upon intellectuals' positions and influence their intellectual positioning and the nature of their interventions?

In addressing these questions, I investigate the ways in which the movement's exilic intellectuals situate themselves socially and politically. Do they see themselves as a distinct social group, a class-in-themselves, or even a new elite as Labib (cited in Kassab, 2014, p.25) suggests? Defining characteristics may be difficult to discern at this relatively early stage but it is possible to examine the current configuration in relation to concepts like the 'authoritative intellectual'<sup>13</sup>, the 'dialogical', the 'embedded'<sup>14</sup>, the 'specific'<sup>15</sup>, the 'prophetic', and (more recently) the 'common intellectual' (Beydoun, 2011). This invites an exploration of the nature and impact of the reception of home and host society audiences and cultural producers. More importantly, it considers the impact of exile and its associated traumas on the Syrian intellectual tradition and political praxis.

### **Contribution and significance**

*Empirically*, the study furthers our understanding of Syrian society and its cultural sphere, domestically and transnationally, as a sphere whose discursive and cultural formation influence social and political reality. *At the historical level*, the study assesses how the phenomenon of the public intellectual is altered by social and political discontinuities within an environment of diminished hope towards historic progress. *At the normative level*, it examines the extent to which intellectuals could still play a constructive role in influencing revolutionary movements in a post-truth, post-ideology era. Finally, *at the theoretical level*, it aims to open a new program towards a *critical decolonial cultural sociology*. The latter will be the focus of the next chapter.

Contrary to 'declinist' arguments, the revolutionary movement ushered an outburst of intellectual and cultural activity that renewed the influence of intellectuals, particularly amongst the revolting youth. Though this cultural movement has been driven outside of Syria, due to violence and repression, it remains very much socially rooted and politically engaged within the country. An empirical sociological examination of that cultural

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<sup>13</sup> Epitomised by Jean Paul Sartre, this is an intellectual positionality which is premised on the idea that epistemic authority entitles the public intellectual, often capitalising on their knowledge capital, to speak out with moral vigour about a wide range of disciplines and topics with some claim to universality.

<sup>14</sup> Baert and Shipman (2013) have observed a shift in the modes of interaction between intellectuals and their publics over the past two decades. Aided by new communication technologies, they suggest that new styles and strategies of intellectual interventions have shaped an intellectual class which is embedded within, dialogical with and epistemically egalitarian towards the public.

<sup>15</sup> Theorised by Foucault (1980), this describes an intellectual positioning which denounces the universal claims of the authoritative intellectual model and replaces it with a more specific role for the intellectual in which their focus is on understanding their specific field rather than making claim to a notion of universal truth or justice.

movement, its debates and its sociodynamics is missing. Such an examination addresses a wider lack in empirical studies on Syria's social and historical realities (al-Haj Saleh, 2016c, p. 3) as well as its cultural challenges (Al-Yasiri, 2015; Elias, 2016, p.29; Kawakibi, 2016, p.20). This dearth presents serious limitations not only for current research on the transformations underway in the country but also for the process of transformation itself given that effective revolutionary movements build their political programs on socio-historical knowledge of their contextual specificities. A crucial manifestation of this challenge is revealed in this study, namely the primacy of subjective factors over empirical knowledge in influencing intellectuals' political positioning and degree of support for and belief in the progressive potentiality of the movement (see Chapter Four). My hope is that this work will make a contribution to our understanding of Syrian society and its cultural sphere and shed light on a social field that has been contributing to emergent discursive and cultural formations which undoubtedly influence social and political reality, even if not always immediately or directly. If the fruits of intellectual labour and their role in consciousness transformation are still of fundamental importance to social and political change as Gramsci (1971) professed, then understanding such a role acquires an urgent quality during episodes of political unrest.

As the literature review will reveal, there is a handful of studies that address cultural and intellectual dimensions of the Syrian event most of which observe the migration of intellectuals but none of which closely examines it.

In addition to addressing this research gap, unique opportunities are presented in relation to three broader areas of academic interest. Firstly, the study makes possible investigating, in real time, the construction of cultural trauma in the context of a failed revolution - an underexamined scenario in cultural trauma literature. Secondly, it offers an opening to examine the relationship between intellectual positioning, cultural trauma, and forced migration. And thirdly, it examines the impact of migration and changing audiences, networks and work-structures upon the social and political role of intellectuals in the context of a revolutionary movement.

These connections and areas of sociological exploration are connected to the issue of the refugee and can contribute to our understanding of the role and position of specific migrant groups in their home and host societies. Such a nuanced understanding of migrant groups is essential to any policy making and important in countering the damaging effects of unnuanced policy practices.

While the dissertation describes a receding political and discursive influence for Syrian intellectuals, its aim is not to echo declinist arguments in the sociology of intellectuals. Rather, it hopes to complicate the binary of influential versus declining status by highlighting the changing role of intellectuals. More specifically it highlights their role in cultural trauma narration and construction (see also Eyerman, 2011; Ushiyama & Baert, 2016) examining the political implications of this role in subaltern contexts. It argues that the intellectual labour of narrating, reconstructing and representing shared pains, disappointments and desires in ways that challenge hegemonic narratives of the Syrian collective trauma both inside and outside the country has had an impact on shaping a metamorphosing collective identity. Indeed, intellectual labour, alongside the heroic efforts of citizen journalists and other activists, is influencing how the (hi)story of Syria is being written and creating a 'Syrian

Cause' that seeks justice for victims and the prevention of further victimisation. But it also suggests that this focus on *cultural trauma* construction comes at the expense of political impact and the identification it necessitates with the suffering masses has a negative impact upon intellectuals' critical and political impetus and ultimately on the direction of change itself.

Encompassing all the above, the study opens a new research front in the broader project of decolonising trauma theory by initiating discussion on the specificities of cultural trauma in peripheral contexts particularly when some of the most important carrier groups of that trauma are displaced and now living and interacting with Western contexts adept at the kind of commemoration and narration practices around which the very notion of 'cultural trauma' was formed. By doing so, the project expands our understanding of cultural trauma formation in non-Western and migratory contexts -an important step towards addressing the universalising assumptions of cultural trauma theory. By engaging analytical tools offered by cultural trauma and intellectuals position theory, it also contributes a deeper understanding of cultural sociological factors that influence political and social realities in Syria and the contemporary Arab World.

Before proceeding, it is important to acknowledge from the onset the limitations of any study of intellectuals and revolutionary movements. Often, it is material not ideational factors that determine the success of a revolutionary movement particularly once it has turned into an armed conflict. But the material is impacted by the discursive (e.g. military power can be impacted by discursively generated support and funding. And for this reason, I insist on a bidirectional approach. That is, I take interest in both how the revolution has influenced intellectual practice as well as the influence of intellectuals' positions, practices and relationships upon the revolutionary movement. When examining the latter, I am conscious of the risk of attributing too much weight to intellectuals as social actors. Indeed, one might ask, what could intellectuals have done differently to tip the scales in favour of the movement? Wasn't it more military power and leadership that was in fact needed rather than ideational leadership? It is an assemblage of complex factors that determines the success of a movement: internal and external, ideational and material, spatial and temporal. By qualitatively examining a key discursive field within the uprising and one that was most aligned with the emancipatory aspirations of its early years, I hope to shed light on one factor in the complex machinations of power struggle and how it figures into the success or failure of the movement.

## Chapters

The dissertation is organised in 4 chapters succeeding this introduction. Chapter one describes the methodology and lays out the theoretical framework for the dissertation. It explains my use of cultural trauma theory, positioning theory, and performativity and introduces the theoretically contrapuntal approach and the idea of formulating a *critical decolonial cultural sociology*. It also defines my specific approach to grounded theory and outlines the ways in which a triangulation of data collection methods assists in corroborating abstruse or complex findings across datasets.

Chapter two is the first empirical chapter. It looks at social dynamics within the milieu and the ways in which exiled intellectuals relate to one another. It takes particular interest in social factors that contribute to inclusionary and exclusionary boundary work including ethico-political positioning vis-à-vis the movement, country of exile, generation, and social identity. The chapter explicates hierarchisation processes in which symbolic power is vied for through a competitive performance of ethicality.

Chapter three focuses on participants' views and attitudes toward their host societies and cultures. It examines the impact of the movement on an ever-shifting postcolonial dynamic. It also studies the impact of exile, its circumstances, the local and international politics surrounding it and the proximities and distances it produced upon the ways in which participants related to their host states and societies.

Chapter four, investigates the dynamics of participants' relationship with and perceived role within home society, in particular their positions and attitudes towards a constructed collective subject they referred to as 'the people' *al-sha'b* broadly defined as pro-revolution home publics particularly in the subaltern classes. The chapter extricates tensions within and among intellectuals relating to questions of hierarchy and equality and teases out the ways in which they navigated and negotiated internalised Orientalism. The chapter also attempts to trace the impact of the rise of the socially embedded positionality on the role of intellectuals in the movement and indeed, possibly, on the movement itself.

### **What does the literature tell us?**

The following literature review examines writings on Syrian intellectuals and cultural life since 2011. It also visits some of the literature on Arab intellectuals insofar as it informs our understanding of the research questions.

Academic studies on the role and positions of Syrian intellectuals in relation to the event of 2011 are found mostly in the domains of intellectual history and cultural or literary studies. Some articles investigate specific cultural phenomena like Syrian theatre in Lebanon (Jbaee, 2016), the portrayal of the pained body in the art of the Syrian Revolution (Omran, 2016), the paradoxes of Syrian oppositional literature (Azzawi, 2014) among others, but none are sociological in nature. A number of journal articles offer some sociological analysis related to the intellectual field: one on older generation intellectuals' reactions to the Arab uprisings (Kassab, 2014) and another on the role of iconic intellectuals in the Syrian uprising with a focus on public intellectual Yassin al-Haj Saleh as one such figure (Haugbølle, 2015). Saleh's *Culture as Politics* published in Arabic (2016b) and Kassab's *Enlightenment on the Eve of Revolution* (2019) are perhaps the only extensive studies of Syrian intellectuals and intellectual life in relation to the revolutionary movement.

In addition to these publications, several opinion articles with a strong analytical and critical incline continue to appear in prominent online and print publications. I will consider a selection of some as they address the otherwise poorly examined issue of the role, sociologies, evolutions and opportunities of Syrian intellectuals throughout the uprising and after exile. Indeed, the state of the literature must inform methodology. In the case of Syria, this is particularly important given the scattered but rich circulation of ideas, analyses

and debates taking place in a regional public sphere. It is likely because of language and access restrictions that these ideas have remained outside the international sphere of knowledge where it can contribute not only to knowledge about Syria but also to broader debates on issues such as intellectuals and collective trauma, the migration of intellectuals, and the changing roles and relationalities of intellectuals in transnational postcolonial contexts. To achieve this, scholarly research on Syrian intellectuals would do well to broaden inclusion criteria beyond ideas circulating in the academic sphere to include select publications of an erudite nature but not yet part of the digital global academic sphere. The incorporation of such knowledge through translation, as I have attempted in this project, can incite and enrich further research.

In reviewing the literature, six themes emerge: meaning construction and the role of intellectuals; pre-revolution intellectual stagnation; the rise of the embedded intellectual; the revolution's new intellectuals; a crisis of the social and the cultural revolution; and intellectuals and exile.

## 1 Meaning construction and the role and impact of intellectuals

There is agreement in the literature on the spontaneous and popular nature of the Arab uprisings. There is also, however, considerable deliberation on the role of the accumulative work of intellectuals over the past few decades in the construction of the ideals, values and aspirations which led to the revolutionary moment of 2011 (Haugbølle, 2015; Kassab 2014; Saleh, 2012, 2016; Kassab, 2019).

For decades, Zeina Halabi reminds us, Arab intellectuals used the power of language to call for liberation from oppressive powers, both local and colonial (2017, p.16). Their debates throughout the second half of the twentieth century warned against the consequences of the failures of the post-independence states and offered a discourse of 'political humanism' which sought to reconstruct the human being in Arab societies and assert the 'right to hope' which underlies and drives political participation and civil mobilisation (Kassab, 2019).

While the literature generally negates any direct causality between these discourses and the uprisings, Kassab (2019) alludes to some connection. In her study of intellectual debates in Cairo and Damascus during the two decades preceding the Arab revolutions, she suggests that it was the demands which Arab intellectuals had voiced during that period which 'were to be heard a decade or two later in the streets of Cairo and Damascus'. Haugbølle (2015) proposes that by 2011 intellectual interventions were directly fuelling certain pockets within the popular movement and inspiring demonstrators, not least by providing an ideal to follow as this activist's sentiments towards public intellectual Yassin al-Haj Saleh illustrate:

I remember following his articles on a daily basis, his smooth language and clear thoughts were enjoyable to read especially in the first months of the revolution when young intellectuals and activists were striving for a theoretical foundation of what they are living in the streets of Syria. Yassin served that purpose as an intellectual, writer and demonstrator with us. (Cited in Haugbølle, 2015, p. 27)

Haugbølle recognises that intellectuals are central to the constitution of the social. They inspire the social imaginary through their personal histories and their ethical stances and practices. They also generate political power by 'expressing and reproducing the Durkheimian forces that allow societies to maintain their coherence and integrity'. (p.17) Using theories of iconicity and revolution, Haugbølle examines how Saleh, for example, 'inspires collective action and reflection that is meant to transform the social imaginary and prepare the social conditions conducive of revolution' (p.18).

But despite the importance of their thought in transmitting knowledge, constructing meaning and creating new symbolic references, Syrian intellectuals have not performed a concrete leadership role within the movement. Most even rejected any such role. Haugbølle (2015, pp.22-23) problematises this anti-leadership approach<sup>16</sup> and raises important questions on whether a revolutionary movement can really do without charismatic leadership. What, he asks, if not a direct leadership role, does the political thought of intellectuals offer a revolutionary movement and how should it be mediated?

For example, Yassin al-Haj Saleh, although an iconic intellectual of the revolution, does not offer a political program, is not part of any political organisation and indeed rejects the role of revolutionary leader. Instead, what he offers is sharp analyses of the revolution's challenges and an insistence on the need to resolve them (Haugbølle, 2015, p. 17) but without guidance towards the nature of any such resolution. Intellectuals' position on the margin of political praxis meant that the construction of meaning did not translate into a performance of meaning, to use Jeffrey Alexander's language. Even when intellectual interventions offered affectively powerful and intellectually persuasive ideas, there were no platforms through which they could deliver them in persuasive and charismatic public performances or spectacles powerful enough to influence the movement's direction on a large scale (e.g. moving speeches or TV appearances). If it did, it was in a limited capacity and with restricted distributive power. This discontinuity between intellectual work and mass mobilisation is engendered by dissident intellectuals' project 'to counter the politics inherent in unreflective adoration and following' (Haugbølle, 2015, p.28). But admirable as its motivations may be, such an anti-leadership project eventually resulted, as I will argue in Chapter Four, in a political vacuum which came to be filled by anti-democratic forces which

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<sup>16</sup> A small number did take on leadership roles, notably Syrian sociologist Burhan Ghalioun who became the first president of the Syrian National Council (SNC). But they were an exception who went against the anti-leadership discourse adopted by most intellectuals.

<sup>17</sup> I use this expression 'dissident intellectuals' to refer to Syrian intellectuals who positioned themselves at the time of the study as supportive of the revolutionary movement of 2011 which called for the overthrow of the regime. Adwan (2020) points out that historically, under the Syrian dictatorship, 'intellectual' mothaqaf, as a normative description, automatically signified dissidence. However, after 2011, a significant number of intellectuals who may have previously identified as dissident, positioned themselves against the movement and as a result became increasingly aligned with the regime, often based on a logic of 'lesser evil'. They are not included in my use of the term.

offered their followers, to use Geertz, culture-systems of meaning through which they could understand their experience of the movement and act upon it.

Without such translation of ideas and analyses into systems of meaning which are well-aligned with their specific historical moment and their audiences' experiences and translatable into political programming, intellectual labour becomes inconsequential in the process of political change. This is why the question of agency is so central to the literature on intellectual labour and social movements, particularly in a context like Syria where sustaining a sense of agency was against all odds but where an 'optimism of the will' was more crucial than ever (Khoury, 2012 cited in Kassab, 2014, p. 16). Impact is as difficult to measure as the relationship between thought and action. And while many older intellectuals recalled the critical work they offered over decades at a very high price (or risk) with a conviction that it has had some bearing on the events of 2011, they admit that they would not know how to substantiate its impact (Kassab, 2014, p. 16).

Govrin (2014) is not as cautious about suggesting a causal relationship between the intellectual production of recent decades and the revolutionary moment. In his book *The Journey to the Arab Spring: The Ideological Roots of the Middle East Upheaval in Arab Liberal Thought*, he explores the intellectual and ideological developments in the Arab World by analysing the writings of Arab public intellectuals, including George Tarabishi and Burhan Ghalioun in Syria. He suggests a causal link between the political thought of these intellectuals and the Arab Spring. More problematically, he traces that thought to their Western education and links the Arab World's plight for democracy to the emergence of what he calls the 'new Arab liberals' suggesting that the spectrum of thought that these Arab intellectuals represent has succeeded in shaping public will.

Whether or not a causal relationship between intellectual work and the Syrian revolution can be established is debatable. I do not attempt to establish any such causality. But perhaps more tangible than the impact intellectuals have on social and political transformation is the reverse causality. As intellectuals take upon themselves the responsibility of making meaning out of the events that were sweeping the Arab World, many have emerged from the revolution as public figures forming a kind of new elite (Labib cited in Kassab 2014, p.25; see also Eyerman and Jamison's 1991 on the formative impact of social movements on intellectuals). Indeed, the political upheavals across the region not only produced new intellectuals but also had a fleetingly empowering impact upon intellectuals (Kassab, 2014, p.26).

## 2 Pre-revolution intellectual stagnation and the Sisyphean intellectual

It is true that there is broad acknowledgement that pre-revolution intellectual interventions, murmured and subdued as they may have been, played some role in influencing public will. Yet the literature is often censorious towards their perceived inadequacy usually attributed to persecution, alienation and marginalisation in the 70s, 80s and 90s (e.g. Haugbølle, 2015; Kawakibi, 2016; Elias, 2016). Furthermore, questions on the role of intellectuals in politics, their relevance, and their relation to power and to 'the people' acquired new scope after the revolutions, including criticism of intellectuals' failure to predict and lead them (Kassab, 2014, p.9).



Describing 1990's post-war Lebanon, Halabi (2017) paints a picture of an intellectual who 'has to assume the role of an omniscient and omnipotent critic... leading the collective work of mourning' (p.70) but often himself 'socially disengaged', 'frail', 'melancholic, marginal and nihilistic', 'consumed by a personal narrative of loss and disillusionment'.

On the eve of the Egyptian revolution, Hazem Kandil (2010) describes an apolitical Arab intellectual having either accommodated the prevailing policies of the state or turned away from politics altogether focusing instead on the cultural. Kandil attributes to this apoliticisation of intellectuals an absence of political vision in the struggle against authoritarianism. Engaging with Kandil's analysis, Kassab (2019, p.73) contends that since the sixties a number of uncompromising Arab intellectuals adopted a critical political stance against Arab dictatorships, condemning them as 'illegitimate, corrupt, and violent' and insisting 'that the root cause of the Arab malaise was political and not cultural'. Kassab holds that the turn to culturalism described by Kandil and others was an outcome of both the persecution of critical intellectuals and introspections incited by the 'defeat of 1967' in the 6 Day War with Israel<sup>18</sup>. She describes an ethos of 'impotence' *Ajz* - a 'deep feeling of being unable to implement change in the face of repression, corruption, and neoliberalism' (p.2). But she nevertheless suggests attunement between intellectuals' yearnings for freedom and dignity in the decades preceding 2010 and the popular movements following that year.

In Syria, al-Haj Saleh (2016b, pp.277-284)<sup>19</sup> critiques a generation of writers who championed big causes, but rarely themselves took part in actual struggles. He critiques this generation of intellectuals' failure over the past 30 years to present a foundational corpus that probes Syria's paths to various destinies or to offer serious readings that address the country's history, experiences, risks of disintegration as a political entity, and the means to overcome its fragmentation. Had that been done, he contends, discourse would have been elevated above present-day polarities and provided much needed historical knowledge for both intellectuals and activists to consult. As a result of their political disengagement, Saleh contends, these intellectuals became less concerned with life as it is lived and became intellectuals of beatitudes or salvation, assuming the role of the *prophetic savant* whose general outlook is one of pessimism because their goal is so out of reach that they believe the vision they cherish will never materialise. But Saleh also acknowledges the difficulties entailed in writing under one of the world's most brutal dictatorships - an undertaking that cost him 16 years in prison. These facts, in his analysis, led Syrian writers to either ignore current local political affairs completely or to engage them vaguely by speaking about the ills of the Arab world and its despotic regimes or of the postcolonial condition.

Beydoun, (cited in Kassab 2014, p.11) suggests that intellectuals and artists have long dreamt of revolution and struggled for change, but they suffered isolation, alienation, and lack of receptivity. He suggests that the masses occasionally paid them attention, if only out

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<sup>18</sup> Culturalism *thaqafawiya* in the context of this dissertation is the tendency to explain socio-political realities exclusively or primarily through culture.

<sup>19</sup> Here Yassin al-Haj Saleh is used as a literature source but later he will be engaged as a study participant. I will discuss this problematic in detail in the methodology chapter.

of curiosity, but they knew change was not possible, and both shared an implicit resignation to that impossibility.

In the same vein, Zeina Halabi's *The Unmaking of the Arab Intellectual* (2017) examines the decline of the intellectual-prophet as a modernising figure over the course of the 70s and 80s, tracing the ways in which nationalist and secularist ideologies of emancipation have 'lost their critical vigour and become symptomatic of a defunct political discourse' (p. 2).

These disenchanted efforts of a generation of intellectuals are compared to the curse of Sisyphus who was doomed to a lifetime of persistent but futile labor (see Haugbølle, 2015; Kassab, 2019). Haugbølle describes leftist Arab writers and thinkers born after independence who dreaded the futility of their efforts in transforming the social imaginary. During this generation's productive years in the 80s and 90s, the Syrian regime's iron fist was tightening that it was impossible to translate commitment to justice and to 'the people' into a political project. Those who attempted, or were deemed likely to do so, were imprisoned, harassed, or heavily monitored. In these limiting circumstances, their ideals, previously enacted through party politics, shifted towards a cultural project and societal problems were increasingly reframed from a historical materialist reading to a culturalist one, (Haugbølle, 2015, p. 24; see also Bardawil, 2020; Kassab, 2019). This is addressed more lengthily in section five of this literature review.

It was not until the beginning of the 2011 uprisings that Arab intellectuals saw a chance to break from these limitations (Haugbølle, 2015; Beydoun cited in Kassab 2014; Kassab, 2014). This change was connected to three shifts. The first took place on the streets and demonstrated the people's ability to mobilise and enforce their will. The second saw intellectuals move from an authoritative or 'prophetic' role to a more embedded one in which they became part of the people's struggle seeing and working from within the multitude. The third shift took place within the intellectual. It was a move from the confrontation of a 'defeated, vanquished and failed self', to a 'triumphant, proud and optimistic' one (Beydoun cited in Kassab 2014). Like Beydoun, Syrian academic and philosopher Sadiq Jalal Al-Azm (2013), long critical of stagnant modes of thinking, celebrated the emancipatory spirit that the uprising revealed tracing it back to the Damascus Spring which, he claims, had set the stage for the revolutionary moment of 2011<sup>20</sup>.

While Kassab suggests that the turn from defeatism to confidence and optimism presents a promising approach for grasping recent Arab intellectual history (2014, p. 12), Haugbølle seems less optimistic about the sustainability of such a turn. The detrimental political impasses that took hold of the revolution and turned it into a geopolitically complex war allowed the emergent radical critique of crisis to give way once again to a crisis of critique.

The Arab revolutions represented the possibility of a return to the time, pre-1980s, when the left really believed that crisis and critique could foster a

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<sup>20</sup> The term refers to a period of political and social turmoil in Syria after the death of President Hafiz Assad in June 2000, and the illegitimate succession of his son. The movement was marked by rich debate and soft dissent and continued until autumn 2001, when most of the activities associated with it were suppressed by the government.

revolutionary subject. Intellectuals from Saleh's generation remember this belief. Most abandoned it, and some returned to it briefly in 2011 only to abandon it again (cited in Haugbølle, 2015, p.33).

Haugbølle suggests that the gradual change of mood from initial elation (comedy), through hardened struggle (romance), to deep crisis (tragedy) has brought revolutionary intellectuals full circle back to the same questions of stagnation, the role of critique, and the issues of the relationship between intellectuals and the masses, i.e. the same issues that preoccupied them before the revolution began. He claims, 'now that revolutionary change has been tried and largely failed, the crisis is deeper than before' (p.29).

### 3 The rise of the embedded intellectual

Despite political deadlocks and a resurrected crisis of hope and agency, the revolution instigated potentially durable changes for Syrian intellectuals. Significant among these, is the rise of the embedded intellectual: a positionality in which intellectuals are implanted within their communities rather than assuming a position of critical distance or authority towards them. Much of the literature alluded in one way or another to this newfound parity (Beydoun, 2012; Haugbølle, 2015; Kilo, 2013; Khoury cited in Kassab 2014; Mheithawi, 2013; Saleh 2014, 2016c; Sayyid, 2011). The revolutionary movement not only presented a chance to confront conservative forces in political and intellectual circles but, more importantly, it represented a 'revival of critique from a platform of vernacular thinking' (Haugbølle, 2015, p.29).

For example, Lebanese intellectual Elias Khoury highlights how the Arab uprisings have demonstrated the aliveness of Arab societies and the ability of intellectuals to now be *with* their people rather than above them (Kassab, 2014, p. 1). Khoury's compatriot Abbas Beydoun (2012) contends that the Arab Spring presented a 'miraculous' moment of convergence between intellectuals and the people- one that will revolutionise political life in the region. It is a convergence, Beydoun suggests, which both the Palestinian struggle and the Lebanese Civil War had failed to bring about where, in both cases, intellectuals were 'either totally marginalised or sucked into bureaucracy, power structures, popular divisions and polarisations' (cited in Kassab 2014, p. 12). Today, by contrast, 'they walk among the people'. Their companions are not their own limited publics but the rebelling multitude for whose mobilisation, sacrifices, and values they write and create meaning (Ibid)

In Syria, Saleh<sup>21</sup> recognises the emergence of a new generation of writers and novelists, born between the fifties and the seventies, who were much closer than their predecessors to the struggle of their people (al-Haj Saleh, 2016c, p. 285). Saleh himself, while belonging to an older generation of intellectuals, is an embedded intellectual who not only thinks *about* the revolution but *with* it (Haugbølle, 2015). This, to him, necessitates being on the ground in close proximity to Syrians in liberated areas as they try to organise themselves in a

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<sup>21</sup> Again, here used as a literature source but later as a participant.

stateless society- an insistence that redefines the role and self-perception of public intellectuals as ethical agents of change (as cited in Haugbølle, 2015, p.25).

According to Kilo (2013), two transformations - both occurring in the nineties and early millennium - contributed to the fall of barriers between Syrian intellectuals and the wider public. Firstly, intellectuals' departure from rigid ideological doctrines and party politics enabled them to engage with freedom-seeking individuals regardless of party or ideology. Secondly, the emergence of a civil society enabled people to organise voluntarily, alongside intellectuals, to achieve common goals. The confluence of these two factors, for Kilo, gave rise to the 'intellectual of change' who is not part of the elite but a 'member of a multitude yearning for freedom' and thus better positioned to know how to fight against the regime while engaging 'ordinary citizens' and developing the kind of culture needed to ensure a qualitative leap.

One symptom of the rise of the embedded intellectual is that older more authoritative models become untenable. Al-Haj Saleh (2016c) talks about the necessity of abandoning the figure of the *prophetic intellectual* and bringing intellectuals back to the present lived reality. As a historical construct, Saleh argues, the *prophetic intellectual* became prominent in the Arab world during the *nahda* but mostly lost its appeal after 2011 (pp.284-285).

The rise of the embedded positioning was accompanied by growing scepticism towards authoritative intellectuals. A classic case in point is Syrian poet Ali Ahmad Said Esber, known by the pen name Adonis, who in the words of Lebanese scholar Ridwan Sayyid 'having called for change all his life, refused change when it came, unless it conformed to his conditions, showing no respect for people and their realities' (cited in Kassab, 2014, p. 23).

#### 4 The revolution's new intellectuals

The literature suggests another potentially irreversible change brought about by the revolution: the emergence of a new type of intellectual (Beydoun, 2011). As we have seen, established intellectuals became more embedded. But also, a new, younger, and distinct type of intellectual seems to have emerged (Al-Turk 2012, cited in Haugbølle 2015; Kassab 2014; Beydoun, 2012; Halasa et al., 2014; Mheithawi, 2013; Elias et al., 2016, al-Haj Saleh 2012, 2014, 2016; Malvig, 2016). This did not only mean that new people were entering the fray but also that they were distinctly dissimilar to established intellectuals.

Beydoun (2011) describes a new kind of Arab intellectual who comes from lower ranks in the socio-economic ladder and is the product of the experiences of a fearless generation ready to take risks to defend their beliefs. He calls this ideal type 'the common intellectual' and describes them as average people, youth and university students, connected to new media and close to the people. Contrary to older intellectuals, 'they embodied real longings, a genuine faith, a clear goal and an effective program that is not based on theory or rhetoric but on longings, belief, a clear goal and a confident path' (Beydoun cited in Kassab, 2014). Their ideas had become an energy carried by the multitude creating a 'moral norm' and a 'force of mobilisation and sacrifice' (Ibid).

Interest in the reaction of established intellectuals to the new intellectuals is recurrent in more recent literature. Riyadh Al Turk expresses his pleasure and surprise at 'seeing a young

generation ... breathing new life into the project that he and his generation of opposition leaders failed to achieve' (cited in Haugbølle, 2015, p.23)<sup>22</sup>. Kassab (2014, p.8) describes how, for decades, Arab intellectuals had struggled for freedom, dignity, justice, and democracy. But it was the youth's revolution that succeeded in mobilising towards that long-coveted change. This compelled them to acknowledge a new generation of 'critics and rebels' and to embrace the chance to 'finally be among the people' (Kassab, 2014, pp. 11-16). That said, not all older generation intellectuals were enthusiastic about the new intellectuals. Some were overwhelmed, some wary. They found these newcomers inexperienced, chaotic, and carrying incoherent ideas drawn from contradictory sources trying to enact them in a popular outbreak of spontaneous and unorganised energies that lacked the kind of maturity and awareness only they could offer (Kassab 2014, p.11). Even those who supported the revolutions often refused to engage with their new intellectuals (Kassab 2014, p.16). Established intellectuals thus asserted themselves as members of a generation that 'had to think and write under different circumstances and in different ways, albeit for similar causes and values as those of their younger counterparts.' (Kassab, 2014b, p. 8)<sup>23</sup>

In addition to producing new intellectuals, or what Eyerman and Jamison (1991) refer to as 'movement intellectuals', in Syria the movement was also a formative experience for a new opposition that Saleh describes as younger, closer to the people, less centred around ideology or power, and proficient in the use of new media as a tool for political resistance (2012). Unlike Kassab, however, Saleh is cautious about drawing a separating line between two generations. He insists that only one line should be drawn: between those who support the revolution and those who support the regime. While a number of traditional intellectuals did participate in the revolution, he cautions, they participated mostly as politicians, and much less as intellectuals. Saleh believes interest in political power to be a distinctive characteristic of this traditional historical collectivity resulting in a failure to fulfil their role as intellectuals in the revolution, i.e. addressing it cognitively, aesthetically, and ethically, including critiquing it on the grounds of its own values. By contrast, he suggests, the new intellectuals seem to have no issue engaging with the revolution without seeing this engagement as a political activity and without subscribing to any particular dogma or enlisting in any political party. He describes how the young revolutionaries, often artistic by profession or lifestyle, participated in the revolution based on ethical rather than direct political ends. They revolted without a revolutionary ideology. They went to prison without heroic beliefs. And their general outlook was marked by sarcasm, bravery and much humility (al-Haj Saleh, 2012). Malvig (2016, pp.259-260) echoes Saleh's views on the ethically committed but nonpartisan nature of the new intellectuals. He argues that Syrians have been creating visual accounts of what is happening in Syria without resorting to instrumentalist-versus-emancipatory accounts of power and counter-power thus evolving an ethos that problematises absolutes and embraces doubt and uncertainty. By doing so, he

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<sup>22</sup> Riyadh Al Turk is a prominent Syrian communist, opposition leader and former political prisoner for 20 years.

<sup>23</sup> Intergenerational divisions within the Syrian intellectual milieu will be further discussed in Chapter Two.

suggests, they reveal new non-binary forms of truth, modes of being, and representations of the war and of what it means to be Syrian.

While Saleh likens the new intellectuals to artists, several other scholars observe the rise in a trend of politically-engaged artists and a new critical 'common culture'. Halasa et al. (2014, p.7) describe the revolution's distinct artistic identity as its only constant characteristic. 'Since the beginning of the uprising in 2011, everything has been radically altered on the ground – except for its artistic identity... [Syrians] observed or participated in an outpouring of free expression that even surprised them, and also shocked the country's custodians of official culture.' Al-Yasiri (2015) similarly observes a surge in artistic production as Syrian art returns to the political arena after over four decades of isolation. Today, she says, many Syrians are empowered by mounting international interest in Syrian arts and ensuing new resources and channels for its production and promotion.

In literature, the proliferation of politically engaged writing among 'ordinary people' captured the attention of Ghiath Mheithawi in his study titled *Sarcasm in Times of Revolution* (2013). Mheithawi points to 'the creative ways in which the marginalised expressed themselves reflecting a society rediscovering and reorganising itself'. He suggests that by occupying the literary scene, 'ordinary people' have redefined the essence of the cultural act and by doing so they have formulated ways in which culture could have a much greater impact upon society particularly in the post-war recovery phase (pp.29-30). Highlighting the democratisation of culture, Mheithawi describes the retreat of all that is 'central, established, polite (in the political sense), or reconciliatory' in the face of that which is 'marginal, shocking, and vernacular' (ibid). This qualitative shift, he observes, would not have been possible without developments in communication technologies, wide access to the internet, and the creation of a new digital public sphere through which the real and the virtual complement each other. He singles out a number of cultural phenomena that reflect this interrelational dynamic between virtual and material culture: the revival of reading/writing through the proliferation of Facebook authors; the remarkable expansion in amateur film-making and photography; the wide popularity of the art of the political banner; the convergence of the political and the cultural in the act of protest; and the emergence of a number of politico-cultural projects which combine strong online and offline presences (cited in Elias, 2016, pp. 75-77).

A natural outcome of the rise of these new intellectuals, activists, artists, and literary writers is the development of a new cultural movement, perhaps one whose sustainability is yet to be assessed (Elias, 2016, p.77) but which is marked by political engagement unseen since the early 70s. Parallel to enthusiasm for this new cultural movement, the literature also reveals concerns about the challenges it faces. Elias (2016, p. 77) questions its sustainability and al-Haj Saleh (2014) worries about its potential position in a new Syria where the already inadequate standing of free thought, critical culture, philosophy, and the humanities is susceptible to a dual threat. On one front, he argues, a digital visual culture already invades the cultural sphere where emerging arts have overtaken the written word. And on the other front, a growing conservative Islamic front with a legacy of cultural censorship and politically-driven centralisation of education is promoting an ideological and moral model which harbours serious reservations towards free thought.

## 5 A crisis of the social and the 'second revolution'

Saleh's concerns apropos the future of critical culture in Syria resonate somewhat with Haugbølle's recognition of a deep crisis that brought revolutionary intellectuals full circle back to questions of cultural pessimism and intellectual stagnation discussed earlier. In fact, concern about cultural threats to social and political change in Syria and the role of intellectuals in addressing them pervades the literature. A number of established intellectuals expressed scepticism towards the revolution, its motivations, and its aims on account of such concerns. But unlike al-Haj Saleh, Sadiq Al-Azm, Elias Khoury, Taher Labib, or Hazem Saghiey who call for intellectual interventions that circumvent such threats, this group of sceptics was mistrustful of the revolution from the start. According to al-Haj Saleh (2016b), intellectuals in this category based their distrustful position on a narrow culturalist analysis and a condescending Orientalist gaze towards the Syrian people. Adonis, for example in a public talk he gave at El Teatro theatre in Tunis titled 'Revolution and Rupture' 'Al-thawra wa al-qati'a' argued that Arabs are incapable of breaking with their past and that unless a profound rupture is achieved and a cultural revolution undertaken, political change would not amount to much. As Kassab (2014b, p. 23) points out, Adonis's privileging of cultural rupture over political change is contrary to the position of many Arab intellectuals of his generation who, after the 1967 defeat, had come to believe that no change in any domain of life could be undertaken without putting an end to the corrupt and despotic post-independence regimes that ruled their countries.

Al-Azm (2011), although fervently supportive of the revolution from its onset till his death in 2016, was similarly conscious of the cultural threat embodied in 'patriarchal and despotic inclinations which are deeply rooted in Arab societies and cultures'. To abolish the threat of renewed forms of despotism, whether in religious, military or other guises, he suggests that intellectuals have a vital role to play in the forthcoming process of cultural and social change (cited in Kassab 2014, p.14).

Khoury alludes to the need for social transformation by highlighting the role of Arab intellectuals in creating a 'language of the future', one that transforms public debate and contributes to 'rebuilding a human and humane universal moral societal reference with the participation of [both] secularists and Islamists'. This stems from his recognition, like Al-Azm and Labib, that the danger of regressing into new forms of despotism, sectarianism, or civil unrest is ominous (Khouri, 2012 cited in Kassab, 2014, p. 16).

Collectively, the cultural and social concerns reviewed in this section forged the notion of a 'second revolution' which is culturally rather than politically focused. However, they insisted, if embarking on this intellectual revolution must precede political change, it is because the latter had already proven geopolitically thorny and unachievable at this time not because political change is meaningless without cultural change as Adonis and others had argued.

In 2014, Lebanese intellectual Hazem Saghiey suggested that the political impasse in Syria presents an opportunity to shift focus from the 'political' to the 'cultural'. Saghiey believes that, if given the opportunity, such a shift would constitute a second revolution that comes at no lesser cost than the first one. I would be a cost that the Syrian people would again have to pay as a price not only for failures in their own history but also for failures in the

history of Arab peoples since Napoleon's first campaign in Egypt when a passive attitude towards public affairs was born<sup>24</sup>.

In a response to Saghie's article, Al-Haj Saleh (2014) agrees that there is an opportunity for a focus on the cultural sphere given impasses on the political arena. He situates subverting both Islamic thought and Western hegemony at the core of such an undertaking. The Syrian revolution and the severe conditions Syrians have been facing, he notes, call for three radical reexaminations which constitute potential sites for this intellectual endeavour: a re-examination of religion including its public role; a revaluation of the state including its institutions and political systems; and a reassessment of the West as an ally for democratisation movements and of its worthiness of global primacy intellectually, ethically and politically. This critical turn in the gaze toward Western societies will be probed in Chapter Three.

On account of political disappointments and the realities of exile, Saleh declares in an interview with the Boston Review (2014) that 'In the coming years, I intend to work on the discursive dimensions of the Syrian revolution, since I believe discourse could be a strategic field for our struggle for freedom and against fascism, both the Assadist and Islamist versions' (al-Haj Saleh, 2014c). The compensatory nature of this shift in agentic focus from the political to the cultural is evident in his following testimony cited by Haugbølle (2015, p.33):

I'm aware how impossible our situation is. However, each time I thought I had understood something or shed light on something, I felt a small victory against a dumb, many-headed monster that wants to keep us in darkness, so as not to have the words, so as to want only what it wants.

In the cultural sphere, Elias (2016, p.82) similarly recognises that the dramatic change taking place in Syrian society puts researchers and cultural workers in confrontation with a number of urgent issues that must be examined in order to attempt to forecast the future of Syrian cultural life and formulate the necessary frameworks to support an independent cultural sector that fosters social reconciliation. Elias recognises the inadequacy of cultural transformation within Syria at the institutional and infrastructural levels in keeping up with a fast-changing society grappling with devastating collective trauma. But she agrees with others (e.g. Halasa et al., 2014) that such transformation may already be taking place on an individual level as the revolution sparks unprecedented creative output in art, film, poetry, and music, particularly in exile. Such transformation is manifested, she writes, in interventions that are remarkable not only in as much as they survive violence but also in the way they challenge it. They combat violence by using art as an integral tool for resistance and social justice in order to 'protect Syria from the forces of Assad and the extremists.' (pp.6-8) If Saghie's second revolution is a shift from the political towards the cultural, to Halasa it is from violence towards art. She writes, 'For Syrians ... there are many

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<sup>24</sup> Saghie grapples with the questions of political agency and self-determination which he suggests are still missing after the Arab Spring considering that two experiences in regime overthrow, the Iraqi and the Libyan, where foreign intervention was a determining factor, did not offer, to date, any proof of any such self-responsibility or determination.



reasons to wake up every morning and reach for the pen, the easel, the camcorder or the laptop instead of a gun.' (Halasa et al., p.16).

Haugbølle takes issue with this suggesting that the shift of focus toward the cultural was the 'chimera that led the revolutionaries astray.' (2015, p.31). It implied that the crisis was systemic, 'not merely the crisis of a national uprising, but a crisis of Arab thought and Arab society.' Haugbølle (p.33) problematises this discourse's underlying assumption that the impasses of the revolution are insurmountable without first addressing a hindering political and social culture. He offers two reasons for this. Firstly, because the assumption that the problem is sociocultural not political shifts the burden of responsibility from the oppressor to the oppressed. And secondly, because it implies that the often lengthy and impalpable process of cultural change should precede regime change and that the success of a revolution is contingent upon it.

It is intriguing that Saleh, apart from his approving reply to Saghie's piece on the 'second revolution', is otherwise highly critical of such discourse. In fact, most oppositionist intellectuals opposed it directly. Saleh dedicates a chapter of his book *Culture as Politics* (2016b pp.21-87) to constructing a sharp critique of a number of Syrian intellectuals for their 'culturalist' approach to the crisis. Six key premises are central to his critique. The first one is that Syrian intellectuals' culturalism is an elitist position through which an 'internal first world' mimics the colonial gaze in its attitudes towards an 'internal third world'. Secondly, it is a one-sided critique of Syrian society which reduces culture to its ancestral heritage component. Thirdly, it implicitly legitimises the 'progressive tyrant' discourse by contrasting it with Islamist obscurantism. Fourthly, culturalism - with its deterministic view towards reality and change, and its singular focus on the need for cultural transformation - resembles Marxist historical determinism as well as Salafist views vis-à-vis the type of change being sought. Additionally, Saleh criticises the generalist and impressionistic approach of secularist culturalism as compared with Islamist culturalism which is committed to a systematic and clear political program. Lastly, Saleh observes that while Syrian intellectuals' culturalism condemns certain elements of the Syrian heritage in strong terms, it fails to critique the modes of production of ideas, the configurations of the intellectual field, the degree of independence available to intellectuals and cultural organisations, and the role of language in shaping the relationship between people and ruler. It also does not point to the social, cultural and political decadence which plagued Syrian society over the past two generations.

The tensions implied by these two seemingly contradictory positions - between a culturalist focus on 'revolutionising' Arab culture and a structuralist focus on the necessity of political change to do so- will be closely examined in Chapter Four.

## 6 Intellectuals and exile

Apart from a paper by Joumana Al-Yasiri (2015), no publications have specifically focused on the question of intellectuals and exile in the post-2011 Syrian context. However, the reviewed literature abides with deliberations on relevant questions like the possibility of doing critical intellectual work from within/outside Syria, the impact of exile on intellectuals' understanding of and proximity to their society, and the cultural challenges presented by

the intellectual brain drain (e.g. Elias et al., 2016; Haugbølle, 2015; Malvig, 2016; al-Haj Saleh, 2014).

Producing intellectual work from within Syria is important, we are told, because it enables a better understanding of the burdens of ordinary people and the transmission of these burdens into intellectual productions and symbolic constructions (Haugbølle, 2015; al-Haj Saleh, 2014). Via Saleh, Haugbølle underscores intellectuals' belief that it is important for them to live in the country about which they write and among the people for whom they speak. Staying in Syria means transforming the experiences of ordinary people into intellectual production' Saleh asserts (Haugbølle, 2015, p.20). At the same time, the near impossibility of surviving as an oppositionist intellectual inside Syria is well recognised (p.30).

By 2015, most oppositionist intellectuals were in exile. Without undermining Saleh's emphasis on the important advantages of intellectuals living among the people they speak for, it is worth remembering that diasporic intellectuals have been contributing for centuries to the cultural and intellectual fields of their home societies. In the Syrian context, a prolific, if scattered, transnational Syrian cultural sphere is already forming. According to Elias (2016), it rose following the deterioration of cultural life inside Syria and the migration of artists and intellectuals after the war, and was in no small part enabled by NGO initiatives aiming to support artists and writers from Syria (Elias, 2016, pp. 78-82).

Haugbølle concedes that after several years of armed struggle and the near impossibility of doing publicly critical work from within Syria, 'critique must be performed from outside' (2015, p.33). Al-Yasiri (2015) calls for serious sociological analysis to address the impact of this mass migration on Syrian culture suggesting that it not only has a bearing on the mechanisms of cultural production but also, in the long run, disrupts the conceptual framework of creative work redefining notions like the responsibility of the artist; the 'problematic relationship between art and relief work'; the blurring of lines between documentation and creativity; art as representation; and the reception of Syrian cultural output by the international art community and the media.

The legitimacy of political and apolitical art is a related theme in the analysis of diasporic Syrian art (Elias, 2016; Al-Yasiri, 2015). In contrast with the argument that Saleh and Elias present about the political responsibility of intellectuals, Al-Yasiri alludes to a delegitimisation of art whose value is derived solely from its political message. She argues that migration has necessitated the establishment of new networks, funding mechanisms, and administrative processes highlighting the 'increasingly tense relationship borne from these complications, between Syrian art produced within Syria (whenever possible) and Syrian art in the diaspora'. This, she argues, demands a re-examination of the entire discourse on the responsibility of exiled artists in the wake of disaster. Contemporary Syrian art is not just a historical testimony, she asserts, it is also part of world art history and should be subject to the same critical analysis and scrutiny.

Elias (2016), in a comparative study on culture in times of crisis, stresses the importance of artists and other cultural actors maintaining a connection with the homeland. Highlighting the necessity of presenting opportunities domestically to artists and writers emerging from political crisis, she points that such opportunities were abundant in the case of Lebanon

where the civil war produced significant cultural phenomena, but less so in Iraq where 'violence and oppression only produced nihilism and regression' (p.82). Elias calls on authorities within Syria to understand the dangers of the cultural brain drain and to avoid 'dealing with intellectuals through the lens of loyalty alone'. Elias maintains that while a 'formula' for reviving or at least preserving what is left of cultural life in Syria is ungraspable, what can be ascertained is that culture can only thrive in an environment of freedom and creativity, never in consumer-driven formulae nor through restricted and restrained clichés (Ibid, pp.82-83).

In addition to the above reviewed literature, it is worth noting that Zeina Halabi dedicates a chapter of *The Unmaking of the Arab Intellectual* (2017) to the experience of exiled Palestinian intellectuals in the aftermath of *the Nakba* (1948) and *the Naksa* (1976). And while the context and timeframe of her book are not directly related to this study, her analysis does inform mine in as much as it suggests striking similarities vis-à-vis how exiled intellectuals relate to their home and host societies; view the relationship between exile and criticality; and perceive their own role as agents for social change.

Along with the above reviewed literature, the dissertation speaks to a broader theoretical discourse in the sociology of intellectuals, particularly as it relates to cultural trauma theory, intellectual positioning, intellectuals and social movements and postcolonial intellectuals. This literature is incorporated throughout the dissertation and elaborated in the next chapter which presents the study's theoretical framework.

## Chapter One

### **Towards a critical decolonial cultural sociology: theoretical and methodological approach**

This chapter lays the theoretical and methodological groundwork for the dissertation. The study adopts a multi-theoretical approach that draws on cultural sociology and postcolonial theory. Within cultural sociology, two theories take centre-stage: cultural trauma and intellectual positioning<sup>25</sup>. Cultural trauma theory offers a social constructivist understanding of collective trauma whereby its experience by members of a collectivity is contingent upon an interactive discursive process referred to as ‘trauma work’. Intellectual positioning theory (Baert, 2012; 2015) is a theoretical approach to the study of intellectual interventions which suggests that interventions can ascribe certain characteristics to their authors, and that by doing so, they position them intellectually and politically (Baert & Morgan, 2017, p. 2). It provides a framework for understanding how discursive movements evolve and transform in a contextual, relational and performative manner and views interventions as speech acts with focus being placed on *effects* rather than intentions. Both theories have a strong rooting in performativity theory which examines the relationship between language, identity and social change. Extended to cultural sociology (Alexander, 2006, 2011; Baert, 2012; Baert & Morgan, 2017), performativity theory offers a mode of analysis and a set of conceptual tools that demonstrate how cultural identity is not a pre-existing thing that causes certain social practices, but the result of practices and discourses rooted within grids of power relations. The performative lens, then, shifts focus from language as a mirror of collective identity to language as generative of social categories and practices (Mar-Molinero & Stevenson, 2009, p. 105).

In examining my research questions, I engage these theories *contrapuntally* highlighting existing and novel connections amongst them<sup>26</sup>, and between them and postcolonial theory, with the aim of contributing towards the broader multidisciplinary project of decolonising trauma studies, or more precisely, to introduce a *sociological* subproject for a decolonised *cultural trauma* scholarship.

While I agree with Lang (2019) that transnational production networks are significant to Syrian exiled intellectuals and their cultural movement in that they disrupt traditional understandings of field theory, I hold that Syrian exiled intellectuals continue to constitute a social field in as much as their dispersion has not undermined their interactional

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<sup>25</sup> While cultural trauma theory is unquestionably understood as part of cultural sociology, it is through a liberal interpretation of cultural sociology that I place intellectual positioning theory within it on account of its performative outlook and its focus on meaning.

<sup>26</sup> Namely between cultural trauma theory and performativity (see Alexander, Giesen, & Mast, 2006; Alexander J. C., 2011); between cultural trauma theory and positioning theory (see Ushiyama & Baert, 2016); and between performativity and positioning theory (see Baert & Morgan, 2017).

cohesiveness as a collectivity socially rooted and politically invested in their home country and shaped by competition between its individuals and groups. Throughout the dissertation, I construe participants as part of a social field in the Bourdieusian sense.

### **A contrapuntal reading of intersecting theories**

Informed by these theories, I proceed with the understanding that the vicarious experience of trauma and the creation of an intellectual positioning are both discursively constructed and socially performed. Such performativity is easier to discern where the collective trauma is central to an intellectual's work. But it is equally important in cases where intellectuals evade the trauma in their work, particularly where they do so consciously and explicitly.

For example, there is a growing tendency among Syrian artists and writers to construe art as an act of resistance in and of itself, even when apolitical in its topic. This position revalidates apolitical art or writing at a time when they are otherwise condemned as irresponsible or apathetic. It enables writers and artists to resist confinement to the melancholic or traumatic not through the now contested 'art for art's sake' rhetoric but through an aesthetic of art as life-affirming act in the face of oppression, war and death (e.g. Abdelki, 2017). It is a position/aesthetic that reconciles the responsibility of the intellectual with the need to endure a protracted war. In other words, it maintains a self-positioning of engagement and resistance but allows the artist or writer to escape a career trapped in the traumatic field. The discourse of *art as act of resilience in itself* transforms seemingly apolitical intellectual interventions into politically performative speech acts.

I will now use the emergence of this discourse as an example to demonstrate what I refer to as a theoretically contrapuntal framework situated at the intersection of performativity, intellectual positioning, cultural trauma, and postcolonial theory. Through a performative reading, as just discussed, this discourse can be seen as an affirmation of the agentic nature of discursive practice affirming artists' positioning as revolutionary while freeing them from confinement to 'trauma work'. A positionist reading, on the other hand, explains the phenomenon relationally and contextually, i.e. who is the intellectual responding to, what historical specificities are they addressing, and how does this discourse position them as an engaged intellectual. Here it is interesting to explore, as I do in Chapter Four, the extent to which apolitical work is compatible with a cosmopolitan position which in turn aligns with the need to appeal to a broader more international audience in exile. Cultural trauma is an equally apt framework for understanding this phenomenon because it addresses the latter's interest in how negotiating political/apolitical representations impacts upon collective identity whereby apolitical work normalises the collective identity, presenting it in its universal and human essence rather than its fundamental difference marked by tragedy. Equally, the choice to deviate from 'trauma work' resonates with themes of agency and empowerment as modes of theorising trauma's aftermath in postcolonial trauma theory. It reflects, as postcolonial author Chinua Achebe points, the author's need to assert their 'ability to face adversity down by refusing to be defined by it, refusing to be no more than its agent or its victim' (cited in Visser, 2011, p. 279). The example also invokes ideas in the sociology of intellectuals relating to the complications inherent in any minority position, including that of Third World or women intellectuals. In this example, seemingly apolitical

work that focuses on the abstract or the universal is a double-edged approach. While it evades the risk of marginalisation which comes with the assertion of a specific kind of experience, it simultaneously entails abandoning what is distinct in an intellectual's experience.

Calling this multi-theoretical approach 'contrapuntal' expands on Said's notion of 'contrapuntal analysis' which calls for a multi-perspective understanding of a colonial text that situates it in its biographical and historical contexts and takes into account the standpoints of both coloniser and colonised. My application of the word is then quite loose. It refers to a multi-theoretical framework in which diverse theories are not merely equally useful in explaining various phenomena (i.e. different but separate perspectives). Rather, it is precisely in their polyphonic simultaneity and their interaction that they produce new knowledge highlighting the complex nature of human motivations and the need for an equally complex apparatus of analytical tools. When explaining the shift towards a more cosmopolitan approach, as I do in Chapter Three for example, a positionist reading which highlights the role of new funding sources and expanding audiences after migration does not contradict a decolonial reading which understands such an inclination as an act of resistance to the marginalisation that confinement to a localised position of victimhood imposes (Visser, 2015). Nor does the latter contradict the performative nature of self-empowering universalist speech acts and their role in constructing a compelling cultural trauma narrative that redefines collective identity in instrumental ways that serve group interests. Keeping such diversity of explanations in sight one can understand social actions as 'multiplicities' (to use Deleuze); complex structures containing countless factors and forces. The diversity of explanations that such multiplicities contain evades the valiative undertones of mono-theoretical approaches. In other words, professional expediency, resistance to marginalisation, solidarity, hierarchy, and commitment to a collective good concurrently underlie the above described phenomenon. They are not mutually exclusive but unfold together contrapuntally.

### **Why cultural sociology?**

Cultural sociology is interested in understanding the relationship between meaning and social reality. It suggests that social reality can only exist through historically specific meaning-structures (Reed, 2012, p. 37). In this way it can help us understand an important and neglected aspect of Syria's current struggle: the fields of meaning that have influenced the revolutionary movement and the cognitive praxis<sup>27</sup> that has emerged from it.

Eyerman and Jamison (1991, pp. 95-96) highlight the central role that sociologists and historians assign for intellectuals in the creation of meaning, identity and ideological direction at the core of social movements. For Gouldner, as for many other 'new class' theorists, social movements are seen as vehicles for intellectuals to pursue their own

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<sup>27</sup> Central to Eyerman and Jamison's (1991) approach to social movements, cognitive praxis refers to the knowledge practices emerging from a social movement through which movement intellectuals, and other actors attempt to rework the cognitive understandings of their social reality.

interests. Alexander (2017, pp. 8-9) emphasises the position of intellectuals at the intersection between the symbolic and the material arguing that if their discourses can instigate mass mobilisation and impact social life it is precisely because of their ability to offer answers for the most pressing questions of meaning and motivation.

While they were not the instigators of the movement, Syrian intellectuals played an important role insofar as their ideas initially provided discursive frames or what Alexander describes as 'poetically potent scripts' (2017, p. 107) which affected the motivations of various social actors to participate in the uprising<sup>28</sup>. Creating symbolic frameworks that reinstate unity and reassemble fragmented meanings, actions and institutions is a key role for intellectuals in revolutionary movements (Alexander, 2017, p. 107). By doing so, they open up new conceptual horizons for social actors and command ideational power by coding and narrating emerging social realities in a manner that offers salvation (ibid). This role was lost when Syrian intellectuals' influence and legitimacy were compromised after the violent turn of the movement as I will later argue<sup>29</sup>.

Importantly, a traditional understanding that examines intellectuals and social movements as ready-made static entities is limiting. As Eyerman and Jamison (1991) emphasise, one must instead conceive of intellectual activity as a process rather than a product (p. 98). Thus, by construing social movements as processes that form the intellectuals they need, these authors reverse the direction given in Leninist models for understanding intellectuals and social movements. For them 'it is movements, as cognitive praxis, that lead and direct intellectuals rather than intellectuals that lead and direct movements' (p.99). I am informed by this model for examining intellectuals in social movement based on the view of both as non-static and evolving entities emerging organically in dialogue and through interaction with the unfolding historic events which shape them. In other words, my aim is to understand the significance of the movement in the social formation of intellectual activity as much as I try to examine and explain the influence that intellectuals may have had on the movement. So, in addition to the ways in which meaning affected the movement, of interest to this research is understanding the ways in which the movement shaped its intellectuals and contributed to the formation of a cognitive praxis. As it takes shape, this cognitive praxis is likely to have an important impact upon Syrian culture and collective identity transnationally and domestically, and to carry social and political potentialities whose reverberations will continue to resound for a long time into the future.

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<sup>28</sup> This is in addition to the organisational role that some intellectuals took in the uprising through direct involvement in establishing organisations like The Local Coordination Committees, the Syrian National Council, Committees for Reviving the Civil Society, The National Centre for Defence of the Press and Journalists' Freedom and other organisations largely the outcome of efforts by intellectuals like Abdelaziz Al Kheyir, Aref Dalila, Michel Kilo, Yassin al-Haj Saleh, Louay Safi, Burhan Ghalioun and others.

<sup>29</sup> As chapter Two will argue, discursive unity was lost when divergent currents became antagonistic towards each other and dissident intellectuals were unable to surmount historical divisions, let alone unite a fast fragmenting movement and a society disintegrating under the pressure of trauma, military interventions and political uncertainty.

## Towards a *critical* cultural sociology

It is important at this point to clarify how my approach deviates from standard methods in cultural sociology and uses the contrapuntal framework described earlier in order to formulate what might be described as a *critical cultural sociology*. A critical cultural sociology does not only present and interpret social discourses as cultural sociology always has but also critically inspects them through a variety of theoretical lenses as well as through the researcher's own claims to the veracity of accounts or how convincing they are in relation to each other or to what the researcher takes to be an objective reality based on demonstrable fact. Now, if cultural sociology aims to construct thick descriptions of structures of meaning, i.e. 'structural hermeneutics' that explain social phenomena, it follows that a critique of the emerging meanings is pointless since the purpose of thick descriptions (e.g. interviewees' views of what is happening in Syria) is not to describe objective truths (e.g. about what is actually happening in Syria) but to depict specific reconstructions of reality (e.g. how exiled intellectuals experience, feel about and act towards what is happening in Syria). Critical cultural sociology, by contrast, suspends the call to bracket the author's own beliefs about what is told in

Interviews. Where such suspension is deemed useful, it permits enough scrutiny towards participants' statements to point out inconsistencies or misconstructions in their recollection or reconstruction of reality. By highlighting and analysing such inconsistencies or misconstructions, the critical cultural sociologist seeks sociological explanations or inferences about the field<sup>30</sup>, its power dynamics and its actors' motivations, emotions and self-narratives.

I will try to illustrate this with an example. When I claim that participants misconstrued the role of domestic intellectuals or tended to exaggerate their powerlessness to take 'serious positions' or 'move forward' with the struggle against dictatorship, I challenge their representations as not entirely consistent with empirical reality. This seems like a pointless endeavour from a cultural sociological perspective – after all structural hermeneutics is about what meanings and structures of meaning are operating within a field not the extent to which these meanings are valid or 'truthful'. However, in pointing to such inconsistencies, I permit an inquiry into the motivations and power dynamics which might nudge participants towards them. In other words, while methodologically speaking interviewees' statements are used as evidence of their experiences, representations and actions not as evidence of the truth about what is happening, their statements are occasionally scrutinised and claims are made for potential discrepancies between what they say and what the researcher believes to be an empirical and demonstrable truth. Such interjections can be

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<sup>30</sup> Despite the significance of transnational production networks in their cultural movement (Lang, 2019), I construe Syrian exiled intellectuals as a social field in as much as their dispersion has not diluted their cohesiveness as an interacting collectivity socially rooted and politically invested in their home country and shaped by individual and group competition which is anchored around that shared rootedness.



construed as a methodological device aiming to unearth sociological phenomena signalled by the discrepancies.

Specific epistemological challenges are presented by this critical approach to cultural sociology which I argue can be addressed by three necessary and internally connected moments applicable to each critical interjection. The first involves supporting the interjection by evidence of discrepancy in relation to empirical reality. The second seeks sociological explanations for the claimed discrepancy. The third involves a reflexive understanding of the interjection or what Bourdieu describes as objectivising the objectivising point of view. Referring to the same example, the critical cultural sociologist would then firstly point to an inconsistency between exilic intellectuals' claims that domestic intellectuals 'cannot take serious positions and move forward while [they] are inside' (Burhan Ghalioun, personal communication, 2018) and between the empirical reality of the integral and irreplaceable role plaid by domestic intellectuals publishing pseudonymously; working clandestinely to provide aid, research and 'educational empowerment' within areas outside regime control; or contributing vital on-the-ground research that resists injustices being committed<sup>31</sup>. Secondly, one might infer from this misrepresentation of the role of domestic intellectuals that exaggerating their powerlessness by participants can reveal a number of observations about the field and its actors. On the one hand it might allude to a power struggle between domestic and exilic intellectuals. It might also be a sign of self-doubt or guilt vis-à-vis their own decision to leave -- a way of reassuring themselves concerning that decision. It also betrays a desire to validate their own position as exilic intellectuals against accusations of irrelevance (due to distance). Those are elaborated on pages 111 to 115.

Thirdly, while it is always important that the researcher maintain a 'controlled relation to the object' and avoid the 'projection of this relation into [it]', it is especially important when the researcher's views vis-à-vis the veracity of the interviewees' accounts are no longer suspended. Thus, the researcher must ensure that evaluating participants' statements multi-theoretically and critically is not merely an imposition of one's own beliefs upon them. The two steps described in the last paragraph should therefore be followed by one where the sociologist 'objectivises their objectivising point of view' including their 'position in the universe of cultural production'. Thus going back to the same example, I would define my own position as a Syrian researcher who is supportive of the revolution, who became a refugee herself during the process of and to a large extent as a result of pursuing this Phd and who as a result of this position is constantly negotiating a need to prove to her awarding institution her critical distance. I would then ask myself, to what extent does this position in the universe of cultural production or any other component of my complex relationship with the field; 'ressentiment, envy, social concupiscence, unconscious aspirations or fascinations, hatred, [or any other] unanalyzed experiences of and feelings about the field or about the social world more broadly contribute to my skepticism towards exilic intellectuals' accounts? Such reflection might indicate to me that in my quest to reconcile solidarity with the imperative to maintain critical distance and avoid identification, I have been particularly prone to scrutinising participants' views and to measure them

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<sup>31</sup> These are explained in the footnote on page 115

against my own. This has also been influenced by my supervisors contributions to the sociology of intellectuals, in particular his highlighting to an authenticity bias which urges critical sociologists to 'resist the temptation to idealize intellectuals' or to 'take what intellectuals have to say about themselves at face value, especially if one sympathizes with them'. (Baert & Susen, 2017, p. 21) If the researcher's questioning of a truth claim stands this three-step test, then it is worth noting in the analysis. In other words, in a critical approach to cultural sociology, any attempt at scrutinising participants' claims must ensure that sufficient empirical reasons to question the claim have been presented, tangible and useful explanations are offered by the discrepancy between the participant's claims and what the researcher hold to be the truth of the matter, and the researcher is able to reflexively understand their own capture the 'invisible determinations inherent in ... the scholarly gaze, that he or she casts upon the social world'

Equally, I distinguish my approach from that of classical cultural sociology, for instance in relation to cultural trauma, by permitting extra-cultural explanations of cultural phenomena, i.e. by treating the accounts of participants as also partly affected by a variety of factors other than culture (e.g. power struggle or material gains). I see it as my task to provide some critical distance towards those accounts and to occasionally correct what I believe to be oversimplifications or distorted portrayals of reality. In this way, what I described as a *critical* strand of cultural sociology breaks with mainstream cultural sociology's commitment to the notion of the autonomy of the cultural realm and accounts for extra-cultural explanations of sociological phenomena just as much as it accounts for culture. By doing so, it brings together cultural sociology's focus on meaning with positioning theory's extra-cultural interests and critical distance from the accounts of intellectuals.

### **Towards a *decolonial* cultural sociology**

In this study, it is specifically through cultural trauma and intellectual positioning that I approach a decolonial cultural sociology. But my aim is to present this endeavour as a first step towards a broader project of establishing a critical and decolonial cultural sociology, one which contributes to the multidisciplinary project of decolonising trauma studies.

Many have argued that trauma scholarship has been 'stuck within Euro-American conceptual and historical frameworks'. As Visser (2015, p. 251) acknowledges, it was Rothberg who first discussed the need to decolonise trauma theory making reference to an 'extended' model of trauma which has been continued by various critics working towards a 'worlding' or 'postcolonising' of trauma studies.

Ongoing debates on trauma and its representations have produced since the 1990s a vast body of literature. But their theoretical focus has been distinctly limited by an interest in the traces of disastrous historical events on Europe and the US – notably the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, slavery in America, 9/11 and the post-9/11 war on terror. Significantly less theorisation has been based on the representation of suffering engendered by political conflict in non-Western contexts despite a growing number of descriptive case-studies as well as media and arts scenes saturated by depictions of Third World disasters (Traverso & Broderick, 2010).

According to hegemonic cultural trauma literature, 'it has been the non-Western regions of the world, and the most defenceless among them, that have been subjected to some of the most traumatic injuries', and yet 'it has been Western societies that have recently provided the most dramatic apologies for traumatic episodes in their national histories' (Alexander, 2012, pp. 29-30). This phenomenon is described as a 'central paradox' in cultural trauma theory, one which fails to understand why 'genocidal actions, so traumatic to their millions of immediate victims, so rarely branded themselves on the consciousness of the wider populations' in non-Western societies (ibid). Alexander describes a 'failure' and 'inability' of carrier groups within these traumatised collectivities 'to carry through ... a trauma process' (ibid). This study has shown that even when 'trauma work' is undertaken and a trauma process is very much underway, the deadlocks it confronts and drawbacks it presents are sometimes more complex than previous case studies have allowed us to appreciate. Equally, a decolonial understanding of trauma evades the 'monumentalism of traumas' (Budryte, 2016). Surpassing such 'monumentalism' expands the range of recognised cultural trauma processes and outcomes beyond the usual modes of public remembrance, public apologies, memorialisation and other institutionalised practices. If we wish to find ways forward in making use of cultural trauma theory in peripheral contexts, often the sites of pervasive forms of *chronic* as well as acute trauma, we shall have to develop the tools to address cultural trauma formation in such contexts where trauma unfolds within politically, culturally, racially, and religiously charged postcolonial and increasingly post-national contexts with substantial specificities.

Trauma theory, it is broadly agreed, is an important and unresolved issue for contemporary postcolonial critique and a radical decolonisation of the notion of trauma is overdue (Nikro, 2014; Andermahr, 2016). However, there is no consensus about whether this can be effectively done within postcolonial sociology (Visser, 2011, p.270). In a recent volume edited by Ron Eyerman and Giuseppe Sciortino titled *The Cultural Trauma of Decolonisation*, the editors situate the book as 'interested in the joint development of postcolonial studies and cultural trauma theory'. But the book analyses the ways in which the end of empire constituted a cultural trauma for colonial peoples. That is, it examines the trauma narratives of returnees from former colonies - not those of the colonised.

What I try to do here, then, is to open a new research front towards a decolonial cultural trauma theory. It is a decolonial project in at least two ways. Firstly, using a non-Western case study, it highlights some specificities and misunderstandings about cultural trauma in non-Western contexts. Secondly, it engages with the broader project of decolonising 'trauma theory', so far mostly based in literary studies, with a focus on three necessary shifts highlighted by that project. The first shift is from a discourse of aporia to a discourse of resilience. The second entails a new focus on the delicate question of complicity. And the third calls for the recognition of chronic trauma, or what Maria Root terms 'insidious trauma' (Andermahr, 2016, p. 49), and its distinction from acute trauma, or the shift from trauma as event-based to trauma as socially embedded, chronic and trans/historical (Van Styvendale, 2008). These three shifts will be discussed in detail in the coming sections. While the literature I will refer to in this regard is not specific to *cultural trauma* nor is it primarily sociological, its resonance with this study's data is stark and it can inform the project of decolonising cultural trauma theory in meaningful interdisciplinary ways. In other words, while my entry point to decolonising cultural trauma theory is through the

multidisciplinary project of decolonising trauma studies, it is with the sociological project of a decolonised cultural sociology that I aim to engage.

#### I- From a discourse of aporia to a discourse of resilience

Earlier in this chapter, I drew on the proliferation of the discourse on ‘art as an act of resistance’ among Syrian intellectuals to show how such a position marks artists and writers’ desire to move away from a melancholic trauma discourse. Such a shift is one of a number of characteristics identified by Irene Visser (2011) as central to a decolonial trauma theory. Various contributors to this effort resist the notion, current in trauma theory since the 1990s, that trauma constitutes a ‘blow to the basic tissues of social life’ (Erikson, 1994, p. 233). Instead, they seek to recapture notions of recuperation and resilience in the study of trauma. They problematise emphasis on the crippling effects of trauma such as ‘weakness, victimization, and melancholia, by which themes of social activism, recuperation, and psychic resilience are obscured’ (Visser, 2015, p. 254). Contrastingly, a decolonial trauma theory would ‘theorize not only melancholia, weakness, and stasis but also the completely opposite dynamics of life-affirming and activist processes’ (ibid). Visser suggests that the notion of a melancholic, chronically weakened postcolonial collective identity is rooted in Orientalist views of the postcolonial world which have been problematised since the 1970s. Even postcolonial writers who distance themselves from what Susan Najita terms the ‘fetishized narrative of complete recuperation’ concede that ‘aporia is too limiting a perspective’ and that much of trauma work in the postcolonial world addresses ‘the need for political activism, social change, and individual healing’ (Visser, 2011, p. 278).

In cultural trauma theory both narratives can be recognised in connection with the binary of ‘progressive’ and ‘tragic’ trauma narratives (see Alexander, 2009). However, the ‘progressive narrative’ is fundamentally different from the discourse of resilience suggested by those interested in a postcolonial trauma theory. While the former is deeply hopeful in the sense of proclaiming that ‘the trauma created by social evil would be overcome’ (p.15), the latter is not contingent upon any such belief. As I will later argue, its agentic force is rooted in an ethical and aesthetic stance and decreasingly in hope for redemption or an understanding of the traumatic event as ‘anomalous’ or ‘liminal’ as in the ‘progressive narrative’ of cultural trauma theorists (e.g. Alexander 2009).

Scholars working on intellectuals and social movements have often argued that an *a priori* belief that critique will lead to change is necessary for politically meaningful intellectual labour. Boland (2013, p. 277) for example states that without belief in the possibility of change, the role of critique becomes obsolete, even nihilistic. This is particularly thorny in a context like Syria where maintaining belief in the possibility of change has been harshly tested over the course of 8 devastating years. According to Alexander (2017, p. 107), in order to ‘command dramatic ideational power, intellectuals must code and narrate newly emerging social realities in a manner that offers salvation’. But what is the space for such performances in a context like Syria’s? And what legitimacy can a discourse of salvation carry for an audience whose losses were directly linked to a once held hope of salvation through revolution? Many of this study’s participants were explicitly critical of the ‘redemptive intellectual’ and suggest a more nuanced modality that embraces complexity

(e.g. al-Haj Saleh, 2016b). Thus, the question of agency also involves the place of affirmative politics and the production of social horizons of hope in a context where such hope has been dimmed by broadscale devastation. Can the negative language of despair, suffocation, powerlessness and tragedy (Kassab, 2014, pp.15-16) shift towards an affirmative language of solidarity, potency, and responsibility in the current political and humanitarian environment? Has there been a shift in intellectuals' understanding of agency from the domain of the pragmatic and effectual to the domain of the ethical and the aesthetic? In considering all these questions, Alexander's conception of agency as a socially constructed ideal remains active. Agency 'is not a great coil of energy waiting to explode', but rather it too must be culturally perceived and formed in the forging of social suffering. (Alexander, 2012, p. 1)

## II- The delicate question of complicity

A second pathway towards decolonising trauma theory addresses the sensitive issue of complicity. Visser (2011) suggests that interrogations of trauma should account for issues of complicity and guilt. Complicity here refers to what Mbembe (2010, p. 35) describes as the 'entanglement of desire, seduction and subjugation' which may include the realisation that the colonised people 'have allowed themselves to be duped, seduced, and deceived'. This has usually referred to complicity *vis-à-vis* colonialism itself. But what about complicity *vis-à-vis* post-colonial authoritarianism? Connecting postcolonial dictatorships with colonialism, Syrian intellectuals shed light on complicity as an important aspect of their experience of collective trauma<sup>32</sup>. The idea of colonial complicity is particularly pertinent to intellectuals in as much they have historically been entangled in this desiring-resisting dynamic *vis-à-vis* colonialism (see for example Said, 1994) but also in as much as their modernising inclinations were somewhat aligned, particularly in the Middle East, with secularist regimes (see also Kandil, 2010).

I address the questions of complicity and guilt in the Syrian context in a number of ways. They all begin with the understanding that 'high culture' was used by the Assad regime as a legitimisation tool. According to Ziad Adwan (2020), theatre and the performing arts were presented to the West as symbols of the state's secularism, democracy, and civil society in the face of a conservative bourgeoisie and radical Islam. This resulted in a fundamental though concealed collusion between intellectuals, particularly those employed by the state's institutions of culture, and the Syrian regime.

In examining complicity, I take interest in how participants retroactively reconstructed their own and each other's tactics for navigating the political under dictatorship so as to protect themselves from persecution without compromising their symbolic capital as critical intellectuals (see Chapter Three). For many, this involved a sense of collective shame (or shaming) for having kept silent towards atrocities, notably the Hama Massacres of 1981 and 1982 which were met with a sinister silence within Syria until 2011. Questions of complicity

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<sup>32</sup> See also Sari Hanafi's call to supplement the postcolonial approach with an anti-authoritarian one (Hanafi, 2020).

also relate, in the exilic context, to examining survivor's guilt (discussed in Chapters Two and Four). The narration of guilt has distinctive aspects for exilic intellectuals in Europe – especially those for whom the cost of contention was relatively low (owing to the relative immunity provided by their status) while the reward of resettlement in Europe was relatively high (e.g. owing to career success). This is particularly relevant where the surge of Western interest in Syrian writing and art (Halasa et al. , 2014; Economist, 2017; Alarabiya, 2015) had a direct impact on individuals' career success or earning potential. In this vein, investigating guilt also relates to the discussion on motives for repositioning oneself as an *intellectuel engagé*<sup>33</sup> by producing specifically 'Syrian art'. Guilt is further complicated by the idea that some of the younger participants had migratory aspirations before the war. In that sense, their forced displacement was experienced as both hardship and opportunity.

### III- From trauma as event to trauma as socially embedded

A third approach towards decolonising trauma studies involves attentiveness to the *chronic trauma* produced by structural violence arising from systematic oppression in postcolonial contexts marked by 'prolonged, repeated and cumulative stressor events' (Visser, 2011, p.276). A growing number of postcolonial authors have criticised emphasis on trauma as a consequence of specific overwhelming historical events (e.g. Erikson, 1994; Caruth, 1995). They argue that such frameworks cannot account for the traumas caused by protracted, systemic, and pervasive structures of oppression, such as colonisation or racism (Craps, 2013). Jose Brunner suggests that in many societies in the Middle East, trauma can no longer be viewed as a single event but as a state of emergency which has become normality (cited in Milich, 2015). Some authors have suggested that the sustainment of a chronic state of crisis or a 'politics of permanent crisis' is an integral component of postcolonial despotism (see Phillips, 2017; Van de Walle, 2001). Arab literature, art, and cultural scholarship are thus faced with the task of illuminating concealed and not easily accessible mechanisms, forms of expression, and consequences of trauma (Milich, 2015).

As a carrier group, intellectuals contribute to the construction of cultural trauma through narration (Eyerman, 2011) and view themselves as guardians of social memory. Chronic

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<sup>33</sup> It is important here to acknowledge the multi-layered nature of motivations for political engagement which I certainly do not intend to reduce to guilt. Rather, I wish to complicate the phenomenon by shedding light on its internal dynamics. The discourse behind the shift towards an *engaged intellectual* positioning has generally entertained four competing interpretations: a psychological need for self-expression instigated by the experience of trauma; a triumphant exercise of emancipation; atonement or redemption from guilt; self-serving limelight-seeking; and a sense of moral duty. The latter is reflected in a discourse on the 'cultural dimension to the killing industry' and intellectuals' responsibility to counter it (Mahmoud, 2014). This argument holds that the propagation of a language that justifies killing and undermines the 'intellectual, symbolic and moral barricades' that protect the lives of the marginalised can only be countered by an effective cultural act that criminalises it (Ibid). Al-Yasiri (2015) suggests that such is the struggle that intellectuals can now contribute from the safety of their exiles. After decades of avoidance, she contends, writers and artists return to the political arena where the world is a battlefield and a stage on which they want to tell Syria's story, perform its shifting identity and continue the intellectual struggle, motivated by a myriad of beliefs and emotions.

trauma is particularly concerned with fear which in turn draws on historical memory manifesting as an emotional response to a direct or indirect threat (Malkki, 1995 cited in Riano-Acala, 2008, p. 1). Syrians who grew up during the 70s, 80s and 90s when the state's apparatus of oppression was at its fiercest have an intimate relationship with this type of fear (see Ismail, 2018). For this generation, 'fear and memory are the main protagonists of the Syrian story' (Yazbek<sup>34</sup>, personal communication, 2017). The relationship between this historical fear, related chronic trauma, and the process of cultural trauma construction is threaded into various parts of the dissertation.

What Homi Bhabha calls 'the burdened life' (2018) speaks to this idea of chronic trauma by capturing the experience of the subject who has 'so much imposed on them' that 'before one can begin to construct some ontological sense of oneself, one has to deal with this burden'. Bhabha continues to clarify that 'the burden is also the burden of history' which forces its bearer to 'find a way of taking it, using it, reversing it and then working through the question of identity'. Riaño-Alcalá (2008, p. 3) intends this type of historical memory rooted in fear and trauma as particularly important for our understanding of the experience of forced migrants not only because it sheds light on the historicity of their fear, but also because of the unique ways in which the experience of fleeing and becoming an exile itself constitutes a 'forced individual and collective project of redefining one's relationship with the past.'

## **Methodological approach**

As a starting point for empirical investigation, I sought to understand how exiled Syrian intellectuals were interacting with the revolutionary movement taking place in their home country since 2011. By drawing on grounded theory as a research methodology in which analysis and data collection run simultaneously and interactively, I tried to avoid going into the field with questions that are based on preconceived notions or assumptions about the field or the movement itself. My own positionality as a Syrian researcher who supports the movement and who has been influenced by her own experience of exile made this concern particularly important.

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<sup>34</sup> Samar Yazbek is a novelist and a journalist. She is a participant in this study. Born in Jableh, in 1970, she studied Arabic literature at Latakia university. She has published over 12 books and many more texts in a wide variety of genres including novels, short stories, film scripts, television dramas, film and TV criticism, and literary narratives. Her books have been translated to 17 different languages. In 2000, she was awarded the UNICEF, Best literary scenario award for her TV script "A falling sky". In 2010, she was selected as one of the 39 most promising authors under the age of 40, by Hay Festival's Beirut39 project. She took part in the 2011 uprising against the Assad regime, and was forced into exile a few months later. In 2012, she was nominated "International Writer of Courage" by the PEN/Pinter Prize for her book *In the Crossfire: Diaries of the Syrian Revolution*. That same year she was also awarded the Swedish Tucholsky Prize and the Dutch Oxfam/PEN. Her literary narrative *The Crossing* was awarded Best Foreign Book award in France in 2016. Yazbek is also a well-regarded human rights and women's rights activist. In 2012, she launched Women Now for Development, an NGO based in France and operating in Syria and Lebanon that aims at empowering Syrian women economically and socially.

Accordingly, data collection was organised in two interrelating stages.

Stage one: document analysis

Stage one focused on intellectuals' output as it relates to the broad research question. It involved the review and analysis of the work of Syrian writers and artists living in Paris or Berlin with a focus on post-2011 work addressing the movement, I re-examined preliminary themes of inquiry, compared them with the emergent document analysis data and elaborated them, refined them, added to them or replaced them as relevant. Document analysis began by addressing evolving notions of 'the intellectual' and their role in times of social and political change while discerning any emerging contextually-specific categories. It also interrogated the various discourses related to political agency, exile, memory, belonging, selfhood, and guilt, and how they impact upon intellectual positioning and trauma narration.

The documents were selected using *theoretical sampling*. This means that I selected texts and artistic creations that have the potential to inform my tentatively identified themes. Thus, following Willig (pp. 230-231), document sampling, in all stages was based on thematic coding schemes which I continued to elaborate upon and refine throughout the simultaneous data collection and analysis processes. Often, analytic work prompted me to sample in entirely new empirical areas from those with which I began the study.

I started the document sampling process by screening the work of prospective participants in the form of books, articles, media interviews, films, playscripts, art exhibition brochures, and other documents. After this initial exercise, I conducted the first analyses, identified some indicators for concepts and developed these concepts into research questions. The literature review was another helpful resource for identifying themes and questions. The themes and codes revealed through document analysis and literature review also informed interview sampling and protocols by shedding light on key actors and capturing new phenomena for further exploration.

While collecting and analysing the work of intellectuals constituted the first step in the research process, it is worth noting that I continued to collect and analyse further data (theoretical sampling) as I progressed in the research expanding or changing categories of analysis as necessary. Drawing on methods in grounded theory, data collection and analysis were as much as possible continuous processes addressing new questions as they arose by collecting new data or re-examining earlier data (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Thus, document data interacted with field data bringing forth new themes which can only be addressed by collecting more data or re-examining earlier data (Strauss, 1987; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). In this interactive framework, to borrow from actor-network theory, documents can be seen as actors that shape and channel forms of interaction. Indeed, actor-network theory argues that the networks of action that arise in everyday life cannot be reduced to purely social relations, because 'things' (e.g. intellectual and artistic productions now independent of their creators) invariably function as intermediaries between humans. As such, the task of the sociologist is to understand and determine how things, as well as people, 'act' through the network (Given, 2008, p. 231).

Although the process of document analysis was continuous, it was important that it formed the first stage because the analysis of already existing texts offered the advantage of



providing 'non-reactive data' (Webb et al., 1966 cited in Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p.28) upon which to base the interviews and fine-tune the research questions.

Where texts were available in English, they were used. But expectedly, the majority of documents were in Arabic. I have translated those which I have quoted endeavouring to ensure accuracy when interpreting ideas and concepts and reconstructing them in English. While translations are my own, some excerpts are marked by quotation marks despite being a translation not a direct quote. I have done this for the purpose of disentangling certain language or discourses from my own or to make clear the length of a quote. It is through the references list that the reader may seek clarity on which texts are my own translation and which ones aren't.

Stage two: fieldwork (focused interviews and participant observation)

After developing a preliminary understanding of the field through document analysis, I was ready to begin fieldwork. Travelling to Paris and Berlin over the course of 6 months divided into 3 trips, I gained a much deeper understanding of both the participants' experiences, as well as the discursive field they were shaping.

#### Focused (semi-structured) interviews

The interviews were based on the themes identified by the end of stage one and described in the introduction. Interviews were divided into three sections corresponding to these themes: meaning construction; existential outlook and personal experiences; and the topology of the exilic public sphere and mediation/production networks.

In view of the grounded theory approach, I embarked on the data collection and analysis processes simultaneously, engaging with collected data immediately by writing successively more analytic memos which constituted the backbone of my thick descriptions of the field. I made use of concepts and techniques from insider research methodology, especially relating to language (Suwankhong & Liangputtong, 2015), reflexivity, rapport, and vigilance towards 'over-rapport' (see Taylor, 2011; Voloder & Kirpitchenko, 2014).

The semi-structured interviewing method was selected for the following reasons. Firstly, it permits the level of openness and flexibility necessary for investigating an emergent social field using preliminary questions and themes but no concrete hypothesis. Although pre-set interview questions based on literature review and document analysis findings were used, the focused interview structure helped me avoid pre-judging what is and is not important information, openly adding questions, deviating from existing ones, and observing emerging themes and questions for further examination. Secondly, the semi-structured interview offers a high-validity methodology where interviewees can talk in depth and detail revealing meanings and potentially valuable interpretations about their own work and experience. Thirdly, the focused interview's conversational style allows for the discussion and clarification of complex questions and issues. This could be done, for example, by probing into areas suggested by the respondent's answers or picking-up information that had either not occurred to me or of which I had no prior knowledge. Additionally, a positive rapport between interviewer and interviewee is essential in addressing some of the more

complicated and delicate research questions. The focused interview format is ideal for building such rapport.

Furthermore, in addressing the delicate power dynamics in an interview between a cultural insider affiliated with a Western academic institution and a displaced intellectual, participatory research methods guided my interviewing approach with 'active interviews' aiming to enable shared meaning construction. Meaning-making was not merely prompted by questions or shaped through respondent replies but 'actively and communicatively assembled in the interview encounter' (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 4). Thus, a position of co-investigators helped minimise power differential and emphasise the shared nature of the experience. This necessitated a transparent approach where from the onset interview requests conveyed the topic areas and the positions from which the study embarks in order to provide context. While the topics shifted somewhat along the course of the study and indeed during the interviews, it was important that 'the point of departure must be conscientiously established going in' (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 76).

The tedious process of separating out the narratives of the researcher and the researched followed Taylor's (2011, p.9) suggestions to make the researcher-self part of the other's narrative. The researcher, then, is forced to look both outward and inward; to be reflexive and self-conscious in terms of positioning; to be both self-aware and researcher-self-aware; and to acknowledge the intertextuality that is a part of both the data gathering and writing processes (ibid).

Relevant to the insider position is the question of prior friendship with participants. Given the relatively tight nature of this milieu, it was inevitable that I would have some prior relationship with a number of participants and that this would influence my work as well as my positionality within the field (see Taylor, 2011, p.8). This can result in a range of challenges such as the expectation that as an insider I would be sympathetic in my analysis, or the difficulties of extracting shared or implied knowledges (Taylor, 2011, p. 5). Additionally, there is the concern that some participants may have had certain assumptions regarding my own views which, whether true or not, may affect what they say and how they say it.

Self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as researcher, or reflexivity, is particularly important in this type of insider position (Voloder & Kirpitchenko, 2014). This meant I had to situate myself socially and emotionally in relation to each participant individually, in a documented manner, as part of the interview preparation process. It also meant reflecting on my position in terms of identities, ethics, and politics in relation to the research questions to ensure that I recognise the conditions under which knowledge claims are made (ibid, p. 12). Additionally, the inherent asymmetry of power in research encounters necessitated that power was negotiated throughout stage two. In the interviewing process, power dynamics varied between encounters depending on the fieldwork setting, prior direct or indirect relationships with each interviewee, as well as their individual symbolic and social power. Maintaining awareness of my contribution to the construction of meaning while conducting the interviews and in analysing the data was important. While acknowledging 'the impossibility of remaining entirely "outside of" one's subject matter' (ibid, p. 58), I tried to remain conscious and accepting of having similarities and differences with my interviewees, and sought to diffuse the power differential by putting considerable

effort into establishing a partnership where shared meaning construction during the interview did not impede my ability to form an unbiased and deep understanding of the diversity of narratives during analysis (ibid, p.62). This also meant that I remained open to exploring the ways in which my personal involvement with the study topic informed the research in ways that can lead to insights and new hypotheses (England 1994 as cited in Voloder & Kirpitchenko, 2014, p.58) including a form of auto-ethnography in which my own sentiments, assumptions and actions can be used as a potential 'source of data' (Briggs 1970 cited in Voloder & Kirpitchenko, 2014, p. 135). While I do not use auto-ethnographic data as evidence, it helped me sustain a reflexive outlook as much as possible including recognising my own dualities, inner tensions, sense of guilt, and self-doubt, reminded of Van den Hoonaard's (2002, p. 123) suggestion that 'if we are to take self-reflexivity seriously, we must recognise that we are always producing two works - a research biography and an autobiography'.

Interviewing intellectuals as research subjects requires a high degree of attention to the idea of managing rapport. This is especially true in the context of this study because of the political complexities and social sensitivities surrounding the topic, the studied group, my own positionality, as well as the influence of the academic institution I was representing. For these reasons, the challenge was not simply establishing rapport but also managing it, including the risk of 'over-rapport'. Working with Syrian intellectual refugees presents unique dynamics marked by a set of dualities: authoritative but vulnerable, culturally sophisticated but newcomers in a new environment, historically suspicious towards ethnographers but committed to furthering knowledge. In order to deepen my understanding of these issues, it was useful to conduct the interviews after initial exploration of the field. This included two pilot interviews and participant observation. As I will elaborate in the next section, participant observation enabled me to occupy similar spaces as the participants and learn about their daily interactions, relationships, and social dynamics prior to conducting the interviews. This 'insiderness' in the artistic and intellectual milieu is fortified by my familiarity with the habitus in its native setting. Knowing how to behave, discuss, present myself, and react to situations impacted the degree of my acceptance within the field, as did more profound bonds like friendship, family ties, shared tragedy, memories, disappointments and hopes.

On the other hand, the insider position has been subject to accusations of 'over-familiarity' and 'over-rapport' and is often expected to offer a clarification of bias (Woodward, 2008; Hammersley & Arkinson, 2007 cited in Voloder & Kirpitchenko, 2014, p. 4). Voloder and Kirpitchenko (2014, p.4) find that such accusations challenge insiders' academic rigour and authority and restrict claims of objectivity and neutrality to 'white elites' creating hierarchies in assessments of the validity of knowledge, and homogenising populations by treating insider-outsider positions as clearly demarcated. Thus, native scholars are condemned to either over-justifying their results or being typecast as 'enmeshed in perpetual subjectivity' (Rosaldo, 1988 cited in Voloder & Kirpitchenko, 2014, p. 4). In the domain of migration and mobility studies, the contemporary 'insider' researcher might be considered a reference to the dominant conceptualisations of the 'native' in earlier periods of ethnographic inquiry. In this sense, the contemporary insider in migration studies is a mobile native (ibid). While my potential position as a 'mobile native' was overall more an advantage than a concern during data collection, it was important to bear this notion in

mind in the analysis, writing and when presenting the study within academic circles. It is not clear to me whether critical undertones towards the insider positionality are now outdated, but situating myself within that potential dynamic is a useful exercise in considering how the study communicates with some of its most important audiences.

In terms of language, interviews were conducted in Arabic not only to avoid language barriers but also because using the native language of participants consolidates one's position in the field and allows participants to articulate complicated ideas and express delicate experiences intricately and freely. Although the use of Arabic presented a transcription and translation burden, I subscribe to the view that language is a tool for constructing reality not just communicating it (Spradley, 1979 cited in Suwankhong & Liamputtong, 2015, p. 3). I believe that reconstructing and analysing participants' ideas and experiences in English after having understood them through immersive encounters that were *natively communicated* enabled me to reflect the field more accurately.

The interviews were organised in 3 sections. Expectedly, themes sometimes crossed and intersected during the course of the interview. That did not complicate the data collection, transcription or data analysis processes because the purpose of the interview structure was understood from the onset as a guide to help initiate the discussion, revive the conversation when it comes to a stall, and ensure no important themes have been missed. The first section aimed at understanding intellectuals' role in the construction of meaning and of the Syrian cultural trauma surrounding the events of 2011 – 2018 in Syria. It sought to understand how exiled intellectuals framed the movement and what role they played in fostering that framing. I also asked participants about the circumstances of their own exile and how it has impacted upon them individually as well as on the Syrian intellectual milieu more broadly including how they relate to their home society and how they perceive their responsibility towards it. The second section in the interviews was of a more private nature. I sought to understand participants' self-narratives as they relate to personal and collective trauma. In this section I interrogate the nature of intellectuals' experience of the events as well as the relationship between trauma and intellectual labour, existential outlook, sense of agency, feelings of guilt, personal and collective memory, belonging and national identity. Section three investigated 'intellectuals' as a social phenomenon in the specific post-2011 Syrian context. In this section I probed definitions of the intellectual; new configurations of the intellectual within the exilic milieu; intellectual networks and their group dynamics; and the role of funding and cultural mediation and their relationship to the experience of exile and to ethico-political positioning. See Appendix A for an English translation of the interview protocol.

### Participant observation

Participant observation preceded the interviews and continued throughout fieldwork. While this minimal ethnography provided opportunities to consolidate observations or fill gaps in the interview data, it also gave a 'feel' of the field and helped me uncover patterns of meaning in personal and social life in ways that reflect on the findings. Data emerging from participant observation thus complemented, dialogically interacted with, and enriched

interview data, in order to explore not only participants' views but also their behaviours vis-à-vis the identified categories.

I was in Paris and in Berlin for a total of 2 months. I stayed as a guest with some of the participants during some of this time. This was crucial for the way in which I was positioned in the field. With interviews alone, I would have run the risk of being perceived as a member of an audience and consequently getting results that were based on a performance 'put on for the benefit of the researcher' (Alexander, et al., 2012, pp. 20-22). Participant-observation allowed me a glimpse into participants' back-stage performances of self, to use Goffman, particularly during extended visits at their homes. Residing with four of the participants, at different times, I was able to directly observe the various ways in which the participants conduct and express themselves. This was a valuable reference point in data interpretation which allowed the discernment of norms, values, mood states, habits and beliefs. It also enriched the study by incorporating some behaviours and opinions communicated in informal situations. Participant observation, especially during events, gatherings, and other social encounters, also offered a glimpse into the 'performance of meaning' within each group. While the study of the relationship between the construction of meaning and the performance of meaning is more interested in praxis on mass scale, insights into how it manifests within the micro cosmos of exiled intellectuals was most insightful.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that prolonged immersion within social situations or groups is a key feature of participant observation (Iosifides, 2013, p. 185). The minimal approach I take, and the relatively shorter periods of field immersion, are defensible on account of the nature of my questions. Ethnography was only a complementary method because what I am aiming to achieve is not a generic realist investigation of cultural practices, relations, experiences, etc. in the exiled intellectuals' milieu. Rather, I aim to understand more specifically how exiled Syrian intellectuals perceived their own situation and how they were interacting with the revolutionary movement and ensuing collective and personal traumas on an intellectual level. I contend that focused interviews and document analysis could have adequately addressed these questions as they engage with them more deeply and directly than any thoughts that might emerge from observing participants on its own. In other words, unlike interviews and document analysis which constituted essential methods in this research, ethnography was only complementary to them.

### Selection of participants

The focus on two different sites, Paris and Berlin, corresponds to the call (by Burawoy, 2003; Fitzgerald, 2006; Marcus, 1995; and Mazzucato, 2007 all cited in Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007) for multi-sited ethnographies that examine several locales of a transnational social field. Although it would add value to include other sites (for example Beirut where a cultural milieu is also present and active), the focus on Europe has its practical, as well as methodological, value for this dissertation, particularly given the earlier discussed high concentration of Syrian intellectuals and artists in these two cities.

As previously mentioned, theoretical sampling was used for document analysis to maximise focus on the continuously evolving themes and areas of interest. A similar approach was

adopted for interviews. This meant that some participants were selected based on their engagement with themes and categories that emerged from document analysis or from pre-interview discussions with selected participants. As a result, those familiar with the milieu might notice disparities between participants' levels of symbolic power with profiles ranging from the established and iconic to the striving or obscure. That said, a tentative list of participants was necessary to begin the process. To create that list, the question of who is an intellectual needed to be addressed.

For the purpose of sampling, an intellectual was defined as a knowledge creator, emphasising the use of the word knowledge in its broadest sense, as 'communicable ideas that convey cognitive value' (Baert & Shipman, 2013, p. 28) including the artistic.

Participants were identified in three steps. For established intellectuals, I tracked the current country of residence for the 99 intellectuals who signed the 'Statement of the 99'<sup>35</sup> in 2000 and singled out those currently residing in Paris or Berlin. As a second step and to identify more presently engaged and active artists and intellectuals, I selected authors and contributors living in Paris or Berlin from the list of authors in relevant anthologies, books, and magazines such as *Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Front Line* (Halasa, et al., 2014); *A Syrious Look: Syrians in Germany – A Magazine About Culture in Exile* (2016); and *[Syrian Cultural Work During the Yearsof Ember]* (Elias & Najme, 2016). I finetuned the resulting longlist through theoretical sampling based on themes emerging from early stages of data collection and analysis as well as additional suggestions and recommendations based on discussions with participants identified in the previous step.

All those invited to participate in the study accepted bar three. There were two cancellations due to difficulties in rescheduling meetings stalled by illness or train strikes. The total number of completed interviews was 29 consisting 22 men and 7 women. The minoritarian composition consisted of 3 Christian participants, corresponding to a population percentile of 10%; 6 Alawite participants, significantly higher than the population's 12%; and 20 Sunnis somewhat lower than the population's 74%. Palestinian-Syrians constituted about 7% of the sample and Kurds only 3.5% compared to the population ratio of 10%. There was one participant who identified as Syrian-Iraqi. The representation of minority groups does not accurately reflect population percentages. But given my use of theoretical sampling, this is understandable and acceptable. Furthermore, the discrepancies in relation to the general population are neither surprising nor inexplicable. Women are underrepresented among the intellectual 'class' everywhere (see Evans, 2008). It is also broadly believed that the artistic and literary professions in the Arab region were traditionally dominated by religious minorities for a variety of reasons<sup>36</sup>. Kurds have a strong presence in Syria's cultural life and they were slightly underrepresented in the

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<sup>35</sup> This well-known intervention was made by 99 Syrian intellectuals during the Damascus Spring (2000) calling for ending the 48-year state of emergency law, releasing political prisoners, allowing exiles to return, liberating public life from surveillance, and reinstating free speech and freedom of assembly.

<sup>36</sup> See Chapter Two's section and Social Identity and Subnational Belonging.

study. This was not aided by the fact that one of the three declining prospective participants was Kurdish.

### Ethical considerations

My positionality vis-à-vis the group of participants can be described as cultural insider social outsider<sup>37</sup>. It is suggested that the insider positionality calls for impression management because of the need to maintain rapport while preserving the researcher-identity (Chavez, 2008, p. 485) and to 'establish respect and avoid a power struggle with participants' (Greene, 2014, p.6). However, the manipulation inherent in any such approach is in direct opposition with the nature of trust-based social relations characteristic of the insider position. Greene (2014) and Chavez (2008) also cite the insider position as a possible complication and suggest that it can in fact constrain access to the field. While these concerns weighed me down going into the field, I believe I was able to overcome access constraints and avoid 'impression management' by adopting a strategy of openness and reliance on the readiness for trust inherent in situations of solidarity, shared pains, and aspirations particularly when coupled with an alignment of ethico-political positioning. By being as forthcoming as possible about my positionality, interests, and aims, I was in a better position to ensure access to the field and to successfully manage the necessary shifts from the role of researcher to researched and back again (Greene, 2014, p. 6).

Even more important than initial access is expectations management. Stacey (1996) warns of 'the ethical quandary and displacement' that proximity to participants can create when the researcher-researched relationship shifts (cited in Taylor, 2011, p.5). In the context of a shared trauma, solidarity can intensify such proximity and result in overidentification between researcher and researched - both an ethical and methodological challenge. Ethical consequences of overidentification include oversharing by participants particularly when different relationalities with the interviewer merge or the expectation that as an insider I would be sympathetic in my analysis (Taylor, 2011, p. 5). This brings into question the ethical soundness of making use of intimate knowledge and trusting relationships or capitalising on the 'privileged eavesdropping' to which an intimate insider has access (ibid, p.14). These questions are not easily answered, and it takes a 'fair amount of time and a keen intuition to work out when something seen and/or said is "on" or "off" the record' (ibid). I tried my best to be conscientious in this regard and where possible, I have shared transcripts and anonymised (or sought additional consent) on the use of fieldnotes which I suspected to be of a sensitive nature.

In addition to the ethics of insider access and multiple relationalities with some participants, another ethical consideration was identifying possible risk to participants. Such risk could be political, psychological, or social, and is contingent on future circumstances such as the possibility of returning to Syria before a change of regime. As many participants had obtained refugee status at the time of the interviews, and thus were already unable to

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<sup>37</sup> A social outsider is one who does not belong to the predefined group; in this case exiled intellectuals living in Paris and Berlin.

return safely to Syria, this was not a widespread concern. But it was certainly something to discuss beforehand. Participation under conditions of anonymity was keenly discussed when obtaining informed consent. Only two participants opted for this. In addition to risk of persecution, the private and contentious nature of some of the questions, particularly those related to power dynamics and social relations within the milieu, may present some social risk to participants as well as those peers they described when expressing views or narrating anecdotes. To address this risk, where deemed present, high risk statements were omitted or anonymised.

Another consideration in some of the cases was the traumatic effect of talking about experiences of extreme hardship such as imprisonment, torture, forced disappearance of a loved one and other traumatic events. When such discussion was necessary to address a research question, it was carefully assessed on an individual basis to avoid emotional harm. Sometimes such traumatic experiences were already a central part of an intellectual's public discourse. As such, listening to them did not pose an ethical concern. While I did not solicit such questions directly, they often came about during discussion. When I sensed that a participant was becoming tired or uncomfortable, I asked if they would like to take a break or change the topic to which they usually agreed.

At this stage, and after a long period of silence has passed, I sometimes worry about how participants might feel about the interviews, having opened up to me about some of their most intimate thoughts and experiences. I reassure myself by remembering that when approached, several participants attributed their interest in participating to a need to reconstruct their experience by telling it. Interviews with post-war migrants have been found to have therapeutic value. Madison (2006, p. 20) found that migrants saw discussions about 'home' and 'leaving' as ways for finding coherence and meaning which offset the feeling of dispossession. I am also reassured that having been previously involved in research studies in one capacity or the other, including as researchers, most participants knew what to expect from a research interview and whatever their reasons, they agreed to contribute to the study informedly and willingly.

### Limitations and complications

This section addresses five issues emerging from critical self-reflection and discussions during the process of writing this dissertation. The first issue is related to the theoretical framework. It has not been easy for me to approach my research questions using a performative framework which has since Goffman required taking a 'cynical distance' from social action. Reconciling such distance towards the field with my feelings apropos the Syrian struggle and my critical solidarity with its intellectuals has been uneasy. I take comfort in Alexander's proposition that illuminating the cultural structures and social processes underlying the challenges confronting the cultural trauma process 'might allow victims, audiences, and even perpetrators to gain enough critical distance to prevent some of its most horrific results' (Alexander, 2012, p. 5). Nonetheless, I am conscious that my use of performativity-based tools of analysis can be misconstrued as an inditement of exiled Syrian intellectuals or a questioning of their sincerity or authenticity. I wish to stress here that even the most 'cynically distanced' tools in the analytical apparatus of my theoretical



framework (say the idea of intellectual self-positioning) does not automatically imply a cynical or self-interested outlook on the part of social actors. Performativity doesn't undermine sincerity. Indeed, the involvement and sacrifices of many intellectuals in the Syrian revolution must be recognised. Many intellectuals, including in this sample, were imprisoned and subjected to torture for those same intellectual interventions that may have positioned them favourably in the field. Most contributed to resistance activities knowing full well the degree of risk they involved. Names like the forcibly disappeared Abdelaziz Al Khayer, Razan Zaytoun and Samira Khalil; the late Fadwa Sleiman, and May Skaf; the persecuted yet tirelessly dedicated Najati Tayara, Samar Yazbek, and Yassin al-Haj Saleh (the list is by no means exhaustive), indicate the level of sacrifice and involvement intellectuals have had on the whole in the revolution. While I do suggest that the intellectuals I am studying position themselves, whether intentionally or not, in ways that are contextual, relational, and performative, this is not in any way synonymous with some Machiavellian outlook. I am simply interpreting intellectual interventions as speech acts and analysing social actions which are attuned to their context and circumstances,

A second self-critique relates to sampling. Some scholars have classified Arab intellectuals in two categories: 'modernists' open to Western culture, and 'traditionalists' committed to Islamic values (Arkoun cited in Moussalli, 2016). Despite the complexities it conceals, I espouse this binary in as much as it corresponds to broader definitions of the intellectual as a knowledge creator.

Eyerman identifies two ways of studying intellectuals. The first one understands intellectuals as social actors performing the function of articulating ideas, problems and their solutions in public discourses, and according to this understanding Syrian clerics *ulamaa'* could be classified as intellectuals. The second one understands being an intellectual as an aspiration and a performance, an 'inherited role' that is 'part of a tradition'. Here Eyerman (1994, p. 97) agrees with Bourdieu that there is no intellectual 'in-itself'. Rather, the intellectual is best understood as an emergent category where 'being an intellectual is also a matter of being recognised as such' (Eyerman, 2011, p. 465). According to this latter approach, Syrian clerics would not be classified as intellectuals.

The methodological issue that I wish to bring up here is that all participants in this study belong to the 'modernist intellectual' category in that they are secularist progressivists not Islamist traditionalists. Indeed, intellectual *muthaqaf* as a normative category in the Syrian context connotes a social type self-positioned in direct opposition to religious authority and Islamic ideology (see also Kassab, 2019). If we take Eyerman's second way of studying intellectuals, this is not an issue. If we take Eyerman's first way of studying intellectuals, the absence of Islamists in my sample may be seen as a selection bias. I contend that it isn't. The absence of Islamists in my sample is partly influenced as discussed by the reality that in the Syrian context, 'modernist' intellectuals are the socially recognised type. Unlike, Egypt's Sayed Qutub or Iran's Ali Shariati, Syria is yet to produce a Muslim cleric or scholar who is widely recognised as 'an intellectual' *muthaqaf*<sup>38</sup>. However, and setting aside contextual and

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<sup>38</sup> Some might argue that Mohammad Shahrour (1938-2019) is an exception, but he did not live in Paris or Berlin.

normative uses of the word, the broad definition of intellectual adopted for sampling purposes and described in the definitions section would place a number of clerics in the category of intellectual<sup>39</sup>. In fact, they would theoretically fit Foucault's definition of the 'specific intellectual' - perhaps in an interesting double-bound where while they work within a specific field of expertise (Islamic theology), it is, paradoxically, one which itself lays claim to universality. Even with such a definition, my defence against selection bias is that none of these clerics/intellectuals are part of the milieu that I have examined, nor do they reside in the sites included in this study.

The third issue is related to causality and generalisability. In particular, two limitations come to mind. First is the absence of empirical studies involving Syrian intellectuals which could inform comparative analysis helpful in establishing causality, for example in relation to the impact of trauma or exile on intellectual traditions. Additionally, at various junctures in this study, I attempt to draw on its geographically limited data to make broader observations related to exiled intellectuals or Third World intellectuals. This type of observation involves some degree of conjecture due to its contextually limited scope.

Relatedly, it is important to emphasise that this dissertation does not have the least pretension to render justice to the wealth of arguments, experiences, positions and propensities presented by the complex and diverse field of Syrian intellectuals in exile, nor of those in Paris and Berlin. Rather, it aims to capture a historical moment in an expansionist rather than reductionist manner recognising that this field, like any other, is constantly shifting. As such, I understand my task as one of 'interpreting the internal structure and patterning of cultural meaning' and of 'understanding the relations between symbolic parts and ideational wholes' (Alexander, Jacobs, & Smith, 2012, p. 21).

This concern about the elusiveness of the Syrian exilic intellectual milieu is deepened when the repression, fragmentation, and disconnection experienced by intellectuals inside Syria are considered. Several participants have noted during interviews that, as 'rationality subsides' with violent political struggle, people become susceptible to identitarian, affective, and other subjective factors that impact their views and contribute to further fragmentation within the field. In other words, and as cultural sociologists have emphasised (e.g. Reed, 2012, pp. 38-39), it is important to acknowledge the subjective origins of social action in understanding and explaining not only intellectual positioning or cultural trauma narration but indeed all social phenomena. My undertaking, then, has been to discern the 'symbolic inputs to subjectively-guided social action' (Reed, 2012, p.39) and to marshal empirical evidence and a theoretical understanding of the link between the subjective and cultural origins of social action in order to build sociological explanations.

Another limitation relates to the temporality of cultural trauma construction. Both cultural trauma and migrant integration are usually examined further into the (migratory or traumatic) event. In migration studies, it is argued that questions related to belonging are best addressed toward the second or even third generation of migrants. However, addressing the question of belonging sooner enables one to capture affect before extended

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<sup>39</sup> Consider for example Muhammad al-Yaqoubi, Emad Addin Al Rashid or Muhammad Habash, all of whom have held academic posts in various fields of Islamic studies and have published extensively in those fields.

adaptation has allowed it to evolve and transform. Similarly, in cultural trauma theory the passage of time is important in as much as it allows the 'trauma drama' to unfold, take shape, and seep into the collective consciousness making its mark on identity. Only then is a thorough analysis possible. Cultural traumas such as slavery and its relation to the formation of the African American identity or the Holocaust and its impact on both German and Jewish identities have been examined in that way. Contrastingly, the Syrian event was only six years old at the beginning of this study and continues to unfold at the time of writing. It is possible, nevertheless, to examine a trauma drama in real time or within a short period (Alexander, 2004, p. 8). Such early investigation can be a valuable resource for future ones which remain necessary for capturing the full extent of the cultural trauma.

In addition to these concerns, a central challenge throughout this study has been paying careful attention to maintaining critical distance in relation to two epistemes: that of Syrian intellectuals as object of study, and that of 'mainstream social theory' from which many tools of analysis are borrowed in examining them.

On critical distance vis-à-vis participants, intellectual positioning theory, a key tenet of my theoretical framework, is premised on the sociologist's ability to establish and protect their critical distance from intellectuals' performative self-presentation and to demystify their claims of authenticity, purity and transcendentality. In other words, the sociologist is called upon to 'resist the temptation to idealise intellectuals, by glorifying their works, romanticising their public and/or private lives, and hypostatizing their capacity to develop—and to project—a sense of truthfulness, uniqueness, and genius-like matchlessness' (Baert & Morgan, 2017, p.21). As an insider, I have had to be vigilant about unconscious gravitation toward a position of identification with the studied group. I had to move between two thought positions; on the one side, the perspective of an insider who sees the group, its frames of reference, its identifications, and its practices in an intimate normative way that may be subject to the partiality of view characteristic of the insider perspective. And on the other side, I had to examine the group, its frames of reference, its identifications, and its practices from the perspective of an outsider, or 'role incumbent', who does not share the partiality of the insider view but who also does not have the benefit of insider knowledge (for more on this dual positionality see Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014). Without denying the challenges entailed in navigating this dual positionality, I claim that alternating between two perspectives has enabled me to maintain the benefits of the insider view while protecting enough distance for a positionist approach and for the ability to deconstruct and critically analyse this all too familiar social world. If my research is entangled with a certain political position (against various tyrannical forces operating in Syria), I allege that I have been rigorous in ensuring my research does not 'bend to political expediency' (Swartz, 2013, p. 145). In other words, while I subscribe to the Bourdieusian view that 'doing sociology is doing politics in a different way', this sociological research is a political act only in as much as it is politically relevant *not* politically motivated (Bourdieu cited in Swartz, 2013, p. 145). Finding a synthesis, as Mannheim demands of any sociology of knowledge, between 'objectivist' and 'subjectivist' conceptions of the cognitive praxis that is emerging from the Syrian movement in exile is central to my inquiry. To this end, and despite a delicate positionality, I have striven to rise above the passions of my own beliefs towards a rational understanding of the field. However, I reject the journalistic position of 'balanced objectivity' on the issue of identifying perpetrators and victims. 'Balanced objectivity',

Bishara (2012) argues, is a problematic practice for three reasons: firstly, because it overlooks the diversity of positions in different camps; secondly, because it misrepresents the communicative space between them; and most importantly, because it obscures the difference in scale and type of the experienced violence<sup>40</sup>.

As for critical distance vis-à-vis mainstream social theory, it is a slightly more complex undertaking. While the importance of critical distance towards the object of study has been amply emphasised in methodology literatures, the question of critical distance towards the canon, specifically its implicit or explicit claims to universality, seems rare outside the somewhat insular field of postcolonial theory. Notable in this vain is the critique of Arab sociologists' 'almost slavish adherence to Western concepts and models, even when these were often irrelevant to the Arab context.' (Weiss, 2018, p. 183) Indeed, balancing all these demands placed on the insider researcher has been necessary not only for enabling me to assess the degree to which I overidentify with my objects of study, but also the degree to which I take for granted the applicability of the theoretical and methodological tools I borrow from the sociological canon to a unique context, including the influence of expediency given my station as a doctoral student in a Western institution of higher learning. Furthermore, how would a failure to seriously engage notions that emerge from the work of 'indigenous' intellectuals risk 'reproducing a (post)colonial division of intellectual labour' whereby thinkers in the global periphery are relegated to the status of objects of study while those in the metropole are 'colleagues to be engaged or theorists whose work would not be historicized but used as a paradigmatic conceptual arsenal?' (Bardawil, 2018, p. 180) I have tried to be attentive to these matters and to the attribution of different weights to discourses. The last thing I want to do is contribute to the relegation of those 'still taken to be local, rooted and representative of a society' in order to preserve the epistemological hegemony of 'frequent-flier' members of a 'more abstract theoretical club with universal aspirations and applications' (Ibid).

It is in response to these issues that I have been intent on including the writings of Syrian intellectuals on their professional calling not only as data but also, where pertinent, as part of the literature review and theoretical discussions. As a result, my reader may experience an uncomfortable back and forth between the use of an author's ideas once as empirical evidence and in another instance as literature blurring the boundaries between data and references. This mixing becomes particularly tricky when I use participants' self-diagnostic writings both as *literature* analysing Syrian intellectuals in exile, and as *data* discussing questions related to intellectuals' relationships with, and views of, each other. My reasoning is that these conversations are indeed happening in dialogue with the broader literature on the research questions and as such do constitute an important source of knowledge, in addition to being a data source. That some of these conversations are drawn from publications outside the standard scope of academic literature, for example online periodicals or media interviews, further complicates matters. But if this is a methodological deviation, it is one based on an understanding of the specificities of social thought in Syria and a recognition that due to heightened political control over universities in the country

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<sup>40</sup> See Bardawil, 2016 for a critique of the hypocritical application of 'balanced objectivity' in the context of Syria.

(Dillabough, et al., 2019), the modern intellectual history of Syria must be broadened in order to take into consideration not only academic activity within universities but also other sites of intellectual production throughout Syrian society and public culture (Weiss, 2018, pp. 183-184). This dual use of participants' self-reflections on their collective role, their contextually specific realities, and their ethical responsibilities is an under-theorised methodological aspect of the study of intellectuals, one that is perhaps unique to this subfield in which the object of knowledge is also, primarily, a producer or subject of knowledge.

## Chapter Two

### **Latent antagonisms. Emergent rivalries.**

The coming three chapters evaluate relational aspects of Syrian intellectual life in exile. In this chapter I home in on relationships *within* the milieu, i.e. the ways in which exiled intellectuals in Paris and Berlin relate to each other individually and in groups.

Fragmentation within the field and the group boundary-making mechanisms that sustain it were the focus of much discussion. Empirical examination suggests that two interconnected processes shaped these divisions: group identity building and social and professional competition. These two processes correspond to the tension between hierarchy and solidarity often discussed in cultural sociology (e.g., Alexander et al., 2012, p. 16). The desire for solidarity, that is, to belong to something larger than oneself and to ‘experience a sense of social communion and a shared understanding of their existential condition’ (ibid), manifested in the creation of small ‘intellectual collectives’ (see also Hernando & Baert, 2020), while the desire for hierarchy, that is, for distinction or social privilege, manifested in social and professional competition. Like most in cultural sociology today, I avoid rigid dualisms and instead ‘conceptualise hierarchy and solidarity as parts of a shared cultural environment’ (Alexander et al., 2012, p. 16). Indeed, the multi-layered intersections between hierarchy and solidarity in the object of my study will become evident as I evaluate how intellectuals negotiated the two in their positions towards each other, vis-a-vis their host societies as well as their home societies.

From the start of the 2011 uprising, Syrian intellectuals diverged into two competing narratives; one that held the regime as the absolute perpetrator and another that didn’t<sup>41</sup>. The narratives of dissident secularist intellectuals represented in this study were competing with those of both Islamists and the pro-regime intelligentsia. Within the Islamist category, religious thought leaders, sometimes referred to as *ulama*, are the most relevant to this discussion. Like secularist intellectuals, they did not offer a unified discourse vis-à-vis the 2011 revolution. While some leading religious scholars expressed enthusiastic support for initial protests, others aligned with the regime, and many preferred quietism (Bakour, 2020).

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<sup>41</sup> It would be inaccurate to reduce all intellectuals in the latter position to the commonly used ‘loyalists’. Firstly, because many of these intellectuals self-identified as oppositionists before 2011. Adwan (2020) points out that under the Syrian dictatorship, the social category of intellectual muthaqaf automatically signified political dissidence. However, after 2011, a significant number of intellectuals who may have previously identified, or had been perceived as anti-regime, positioned themselves against the movement and as a result became increasingly aligned with the regime, here often construed as ‘the lesser evil’.

Even within the group that stood for political change, some, like Mohammad Shahrour<sup>42</sup>, rejected violence and maintained an equal distance from both the Islamist opposition and the regime describing them as equally monolithic. Others, like Moaz Al-Khatib<sup>43</sup>, supported the militarisation of the movement but were critical of the role of Salafist militants in distorting the framing of the Syrian uprising, which enabled its portrayal as an ‘extremist’ movement. Their visions for a post-Assad Syria were equally divergent. Some envisioned an Islamic state ruled by Sharia law, while others, notably in a recent manifesto by the Muslim Brotherhood of Syria, expressed support for political pluralism and respect for individual rights (2013).

Pro-regime intellectuals had a slightly more coherent discourse. It drew on established narratives in an indoctrinated Syrian collective consciousness, such as the idea of a Western conspiracy against Syria linked to its supposed resistance to Israel. By linking these established narratives with current events, these writers and artists echoed the regime’s official discourse about the movement and portrayed protestors as mercenaries acting on behalf of foreign powers influencing a misled minority of naïve Syrians. They drew on the construct of the eternal leader, which paradoxically applied to Bashar Assad, and his father before him, as trailblazers, saviours, and heroes.

In addition to these competing discourses, divisions within the oppositionist camp multiplied over the years. And as the narratives of dissident secularist intellectuals dispersed, they began competing amongst themselves, not only with those of other forces within the struggle. Despite the enormity of stakes and the relative similarity of historical experiences, cultural influences, analytic tools, imminent circumstances, and political objectives, dissident intellectuals were unable to achieve a level of narrative cohesion towards their shared goal of achieving democratic change in Syria sufficient to form a political front or fronts. Even among those who had a broadly unified political agenda (e.g., to bring down the regime, reform institutions, democratise governance across social institutions, and reinstate rule-of-law), discursive fragmentation played out not only in *intra-intellectual* arenas but also, to the detriment of the movement’s credibility, in the *public intellectual* arena.<sup>44</sup>

### **Small collectives. Great enmities.**

The fragmentation of the Syrian opposition, both before and after 2011, has been heavily discussed (e.g., Landis & Pace, 2007; Ghalioun, 2019). The perception of a fragmented

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<sup>42</sup> Shahrour is a Syrian author who wrote extensively about Islam. His work suggests that the region's crisis is above all a moral and intellectual one and called for a re-reading of religious texts, which supports liberal political positions such as pluralism. He was an Emeritus Professor of Civil Engineering at Damascus University.

<sup>43</sup> Described as a moderate Islamist, Al-Khatib is a former imam of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. In 2012, he became the president of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces.

<sup>44</sup> Via Bourdieu, Baert (2015) distinguishes between an *intra-intellectual arena* or what Bourdieu (1995) describes as ‘the field of restricted intellectual production’ and a *public intellectual arena* or what Bourdieu calls ‘the field of generalized cultural production’.

opposition was the object of severe criticism and often conflated with a similarly fragmented and antagonistic intellectual field. Liwaa Yazji<sup>45</sup> describes ‘clusters [of intellectuals], each representing a political position which is at war with some other cluster’ (personal communication, 2017). In our interview, Ayham Majeed Agha<sup>46</sup> tried to list these antagonistic clusters and lamented intellectuals’ entanglement in collective blame when they should be engaging in effective political organising,

You have the sympathisers with Islamists, and the radical left, and the promoters of US intervention, and the ones who lie on the news networks. Who are these people? They are the intellectuals of Syria. They are the elites of Syria. When they finally came into politics, they did nothing but exchange accusations.

Similarly, Berlin-based poet Mohammad Abou Laban (personal communication, 2018) described intellectuals’ preoccupation with ‘creating clusters and drawing boundaries around them’. He suggested that these clusters often circled around cultural or media organisations describing their boundary work in terms evocative of the rites of loyalty-performance inherited from the regime, such as sloganeering: ‘Every group has slogans that one must deliver to belong to the group’. (Anonymous participant, personal communication, 2017). Burhan Ghalioun<sup>47</sup> (2019) dedicated a book to recounting the internal schisms which

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<sup>45</sup> Liwaa Yazji is a filmmaker, playwright, screenwriter, dramaturge, and poet. She is a participant in this study. Born in 1977 in Moscow to Syrian parents, she grew up in Aleppo and Damascus where she completed an undergraduate degree in English literature, a postgraduate diploma in literary studies, and a degree in Theatre Studies. She worked as a dramaturge and assistant director before being appointed in 2007 to the General Committee of the Damascus Capital of Arab Culture where she was in charge of programming the year's Syrian theatre and dance repertoires. In 2011, she started working on her first feature documentary *Haunted* which was released in 2014. In 2012 she moved to Lebanon and then to Berlin in 2016. Since 2012, Liwaa's work has been receiving increasing international attention. Her feature documentary *Haunted* (2014) won Special Mention in its premier in the FID Marseille Festival of Documentary Film the year it was released before it was awarded the Al Waha Bronz at the FIFAG- Tunisia in 2016. That same year, her play *Q&Q* which was commissioned by the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester premiered at the Birth Project in the UK and was later featured at the Edinburgh International Festival and the Women Playwright International Conference in Chile. In 2017, her play *Goats* also premiered at the Royal Court Theatre in London.

<sup>46</sup> Ayham Majid Agha is an actor, writer, and director. He is a participant in this study. Born in 1980 in Syria, he graduated from the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus, where he served as a junior professor from 2006 to 2012. From 2005 to 2012, he was a co-founder and member of Theatre Studio, which conducted interactive theatre projects in Syrian villages. He has had numerous engagements at theatres in Damascus, Manchester, Amman, Beirut, Cairo, Seoul, Paris, Lyon, Munich, and Hanover. He is living in Germany since 2013 and mainly worked at the Maxim Gorki Theatre in Berlin, most recently as senior director and co-founder of the Exil Ensemble. Together with the novelist Olga Grjasnowa, he directed the interactive theatre cooking show *Conflict Food*. In 2017 he opened the season in the Studio Я of the Maxim Gorki Theatre with his play *Skeleton of an Elephant in the Desert* which was later awarded the Young Theatre Critics Award at the festival for young directors *Radikal Jung* in 2018.

<sup>47</sup> Burhan Ghalioun is a professor of political sociology and Arab civilization and society at the Université de Paris III Sorbonne. He was the first chairman of the Syrian National Council (SNC). Born in Homs in 1945, Ghalioun studied sociology and philosophy at the University of Damascus. In 1969, he moved to Paris where he completed a Ph.D. in social science from the Université Paris vii and a Doctorat d'état in humanities from the Sorbonne. In the late 1970s, he became recognised as a proponent of democratisation in the Arab region after



undermined the Syrian revolution. Recognising military loss as the result of the intervention of foreign powers, he nevertheless blames the opposition for its failure to form a unified national leadership rather than act within multiple antagonistic groups formed around partisan, ethnic, sectarian, and regional belongings.

It is possible to organise divisions along 4 key axes: ethicopolitical positioning, generational belonging, geographical location, and social identity.

#### Ethicopolitical positioning

Participants generally described the ethicopolitical positions of intellectuals as discordant and fragmented. They believed that these discordances, which some traced back to historical divisions in the political left while others attributed to a conscious regime strategy, were detrimental to the movement.

Palestinian intellectual Nasri Hajaj (2019) appraises Syrian intellectuals' divisions after 2011 along axes of the defensive use of violence and political Islam (see also Ismail, 2018). In this regard, Hajaj divides Syrian intellectuals into 3 groups. The first welcomed Islamists' participation as advantageous, even necessary, in confronting a violent regime. This group viewed toppling the regime as the only short-term objective. Despite being predominantly universalist, secularist, and humanist (see also Kassab, 2019) and despite having championed a critique of religion and particularly of political Islam for decades, during the early years of the revolution, they considered such critique to be untimely and meaningless. For example, in a Facebook post on 29 December, 2012 Yassin al-Haj Saleh<sup>48</sup> wrote: 'until

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publishing 'A Manifesto for Democracy'. He co-founded the Arab Organization for Human Rights in 1983. In 2000, Ghalioun became an active participant in the short-lived Damascus Spring, and in 2005, he took part in the Damascus Declaration. When the revolution broke out in 2011, Ghalioun was a public supporter of the protesters, working to bring together opposition groups. In August 2011, he was appointed as the first president of the Syrian National Council (SNC); an umbrella group that aimed to unify the many factions opposed to Assad's government. By February 2012 his leadership became controversial and he resigned in an attempt to heal growing divisions in the SNC. He is the author of numerous books in sociology and the politics of the Islamic world many of which have been translated, notable among these are *Assassination of the Mind*, *Democratic Choice in Syria*, *Sectarianism and Minorities*, and *The Elite Society*, *Le malaise Arabe: l'Etat Contre la Nation*, and *Islam et Politique: la Modernité Trahie*. He is a participant in this study.

<sup>48</sup> Yassin al Haj Saleh has been called the iconic intellectual of the revolution. He is a writer and public intellectual. Born in Raqqa in 1961, he went to medical school at the University of Aleppo. In 1980 and while still a medical student, 19-year-old Yassin was arrested because of his membership in the Syrian Communist Party- Political Bureau. He was released 16 years later. He spent most of 2011 and 2012 in hiding, writing on the unfolding uprising. In April 2013, he moved to Douma City in Eastern Ghouta, by then outside the control of the regime, where he was writing on-the-ground analyses and articles. In July of that year, he headed towards Raqqa, his hometown, in a 19-day perilous journey. On his way there, Raqqa was captured by ISIS, and Yassin was informed that his brother was kidnapped by the organization. Soon after, his wife Samira Khalil, herself a writer and activist, was held captive by Islamist factions in Douma. They are both still missing at the time of writing. From Raqqa, Saleh fled to Turkey and relocated in 2017 to Berlin where he was offered a fellowship at the Berlin Institute for Advanced Study (Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin). He has written prolifically on political, social, and cultural subjects and contributed regularly to the London-based Al-Hayat newspaper,

the downfall of the regime there are no Salafists, devils or evil creature aside from it [the regime]... perhaps this position is crude and populist, perhaps it offends your sensibilities, brothers. But to be honest, it is all we have!’ (as cited in Hajaj, 2019). Similarly, in an article published in *Al Quds Al Arabi*, Subhi Hadidi<sup>49</sup> (2012) likened the Islamist mujahideen flooding to fight in Syria to the International Brigade of world communists who fought with the Spanish Republicans against Franco’s fascism during the Spanish Civil War. The second group of intellectuals was radically anti-Islamist to the extent that in some cases, as in that of its most iconic figure Adonis, the critique of Islam led to a rejection of the revolution. A third group, represented by the Marxist public intellectual and academic Sadiq Jalal Al-Azm, persisted in its critique of religious thought which it had carried out for decades but had no hesitations at the same time, to clearly and resolutely condemn dictatorship and support the revolution.

Public intellectual and activist Yassin Al-Haj Saleh finds ‘competing narratives’ and ‘multiple divisions’ among intellectuals to be a ‘chief characteristic’ of the movement.

Sorbonne sociologist Burhan Ghalioun (2019) suggests that these divisions centred around questions of foreign intervention, militarisation, and Islamisation, are not the result of some historical determinism but of deliberate political choices and strategies which ultimately shaped the destiny of the uprising. In our interview (2018), literary critic and political writer Subhi Hadidi suggests that it is ‘the overdue missions for Syrian intellectuals to conduct a deep and comprehensive self-critique surrounding these different positions and narratives’ and their role in hindering the success of the movement.

These political divisions may be traced back to a major schism among Arab intellectuals in the mid-to-late 1970s. Fadi Bardawil (2018, p. 178) links this schism to the Arab defeat in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war and to the failure of the project of pan-Arabism which gradually induced a juncture between intellectuals who would criticise their peers for ‘importing Orientalist taxonomies into their thought’ by focusing on self-criticism and turning their analytical gazes inwards to examine the cultural and structural faults in their own societies,

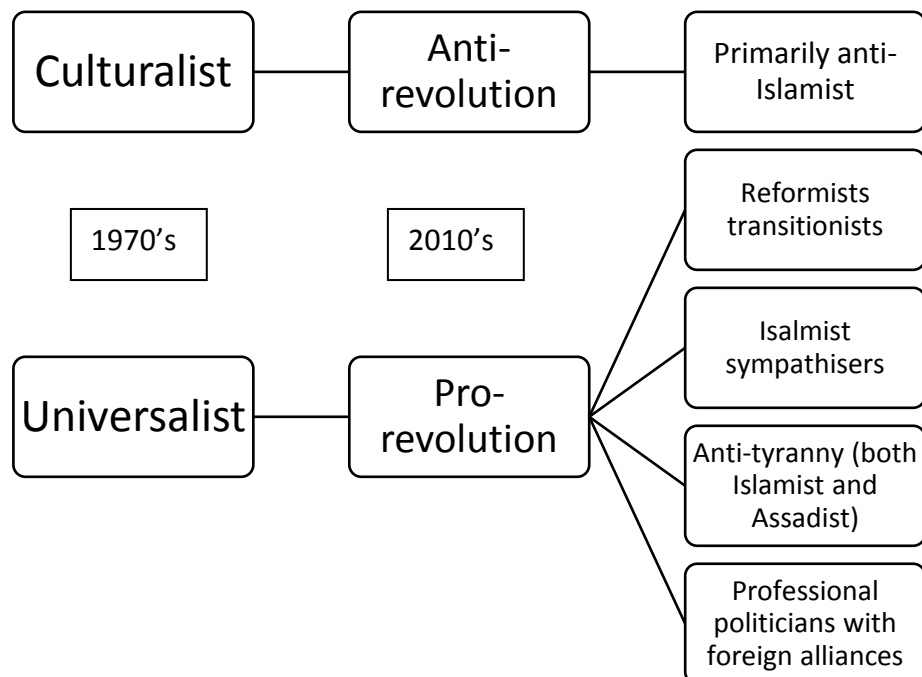
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the Egyptian leftist magazine *Al-Bosla*. He mostly writes now for the Syrian online periodical *Al Jumhuriya* (The Republic) of which he is a co-founder. He has published seven books to date the latest of which, *The Impossible Revolution: Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy*, was translated into English and published by Hurst Publishers, London in 2017. He is a participant in this study.

<sup>49</sup> Subhi Hadidi is a literary critic and translator. He is a participant in this study. Born in Qamishli in 1951, he graduated from Damascus University’s Department of English language and literature and continued his postgraduate studies in France and Britain. He has authored 11 books and numerous critical studies in leading Arab and international periodicals with a focus on the contemporary Arab poetry scene, in particular, Mahmoud Darwish and the prose poem. As a translator, he has worked on seminal works in philosophy, novels, poetry, and critical theory. He also presented in-depth studies on the definition of literary theory and contemporary critical schools with a focus on postmodernism, theories of post-colonial discourse, theories of reading and response, the new historicism criticism. Politically, he is a member of the Syrian Communist Party - Political Bureau or what is more recently known as the Syrian Democratic People’s Party. He lives in Paris and writes periodically for the London-based Arabic language newspaper *Al-Quds al-Arabi* and the Paris-based French monthly *Le Nouvel Afrique-Asie*.

and those who would latch onto the universal impulses of Marxism and Liberalism (see also Kassab, 2019, p. 73).

Broadly speaking, intellectuals who sided against the revolution aligned with the former camp, while those who sided with it aligned with the latter. I have attempted in the following graph to chart the aggregate contemporary ethicopolitical positions of intellectuals as described by participants with their genealogical roots in a simplified manner.



These categories are intended as illustrative of ethicopolitical divisions. They do not cover the copious shades of grey within different positions. Further divisions arose around the nature of transitional justice, for example, or the type of social contract that would follow the fall of the regime.

The point I wish to emphasise here is that broad agreement on the designation of victim and perpetrator among dissident intellectuals wasn't enough to form a unified political force or epistemic community that could influence the direction of the movement through its increasingly contested institutions: the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces; the Syrian National Council; the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change; the Syrian Democratic Council or any of the less formal groups affiliated with the Syrian opposition.

While political differences were at the forefront of the disputes, some participants argued that it was not a fundamental ideological incompatibility that fragmented the field but a narcissistic struggle over the moral high ground.

The dispute was not political. It was ethical. You can never tell what is collectively seen as ethical and what isn't because everyone makes up their own ethics... (Ayham Majeed Agha, personal communication, 2018)

Fragmentation was exacerbated by the tendency, not uncommon among intellectuals, to define one's position by juxtaposing it against a particular intellectual current or a specific public figure. Baert refers to this approach as 'anti-positioning' (Baert & Susen, 2017, p. 26) and describes it as an effective way to achieve intellectual positioning in relation to an already positioned party. A well-known example of this in Syria is a series of polemical interviews with Adonis and Sadiq Jalal Al-Azm, whose diatribes played out over several pan-Arab TV shows and became the object of numerous articles both online and in the print media. But this example involves two very well-established intellectuals both at the end of their careers and, importantly, on opposite sides of the revolutionary movement. While the polemics may have helped reinforce their respective positions and explicate specific nuances within each, it is difficult to say who was positioning against whom.

Conversely, anti-positioning was a particularly attractive strategy for young writers and artists trying to carve out a place for themselves in the field by asserting an antagonistic position towards an established intellectual. Interestingly, Adonis became a frequent object of such anti-positioning in dissident circles. His controversial self-positioning against the revolution and consequent positioning (by peers) as a loyalist became particularly useful in allowing young oppositionists with intellectual aspirations not only to develop a clear positioning as revolutionaries but to do it with an intellectual flair. While she may not have identified this approach as 'anti-positioning', Liwaa Yazji described the attack on Adonis as a pass for inclusion into the milieu. For example, in our first interview (2017), she criticises the phenomenon of writers who 'present themselves as intellectuals' and 'start to create clusters around themselves' by merely writing in support of the revolution, 'regardless of the artistic value of their work'. As an example, she offers the negative prototype of a 'young person who is ... particularly ruthless towards Adonis, and who as a result attracts a following and a chorus'.

While the previous examples link the frequent use of anti-positioning with the fragmentation of the intellectual field as a whole, of particular importance is the pulverising use of anti-positioning within dissident circles, including sometimes criticism of deceased authors deprived of the opportunity to defend themselves (see also Baert & Susen, 2017, p. 32). For example, Hussein Chawich's<sup>50</sup> (2017) accusations of sectarianism towards Sadiq Jalal Al-Azm shortly after his death in Berlin in 2016. In this criticism, Chawich, a Berlin-based writer, seems more interested in formulating an ethical positioning against

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<sup>50</sup> Husein Chawich is a physician, psychologist, and writer. He is a participant in this study. Born in 1953 to a Palestinian family in Syria, he studied medicine at Aleppo University and psychology in Germany, where he lives since 1990. He has four published books intersecting various genres, including political analysis, Sufism, travel journaling, comparative anthropology and political psychology and numerous articles in leading Arabic language periodicals and academic journals. His latest book awaiting publication discusses the different narratives of Islamic sectarianism, and he currently works on a book on the Grand Narratives of The Palestinian Tragedy. He was the recipient of the Ibn Battuta Prize for Travel Literature 2009 and the Awda Award for newspaper fiction in 2010.

sectarianism than in specifically engaging with Al-Azm. His accusations towards Al-Azm seem tenuous, but, as is often the case with anti-positioning, this is incidental. Rather, the intervention constructs a radically anti-sectarian discourse that positions its author at the centre of that discourse/positioning. Indeed, around the time of the publication of that article, Chawich published a much more compelling book titled 'The Heavy Ashes' (2017), which offers a historical structuralist understanding of sectarianism and the 'demonic' conscious and unconscious mechanisms for its reproduction, optimistically construing it as an inevitably transient phenomenon.

### Fragmentary collectives and the digital sphere

Because they shared the same digital public sphere, polemical disagreements amongst dissident intellectuals often manifested as social media wars. Complaining about the trending derogatory use of the term 'white Syrians' Ziad Adwan<sup>51</sup> grumbled to me in a Berlin coffee shop (2018) about there being a 'million derogatory adjectives by Syrians about other Syrians that only serve to create divisions' adding that 'with Facebook, these [divisions] have become so public and so very widespread.'

Indeed, inter-group antagonism was not only reflected through but arguably facilitated by the expansive use of social media, resulting in online rows which were so frequent they seem to be as 'outrageous' as they are irresistible. Ayham Majeed Agha attributes this pattern of antagonistic clustering to narrow-mindedness, lack of collegiality, and weak ethical judgement.

A few got away, in the professional and ethical sense, but the majority got stuck in their own narratives and forgot to meet one another to create a unified mass, a movement. They meet on Facebook in groups of four, each hating on the others! (Personal communication, Berlin 2018)

In effect, a feedback loop between rising levels of partisanship and media cocooning resulted in 'epistemic closure' as theorised elsewhere in the ideas industry (Drezner, 2017, p. 57). This resulted in the ossification of political positions and views that further reinforced the tendency towards clustering within fragmentary and disconnected collectives.

To maintain themselves, intellectual collectives had to operate under conditions of closure and enforce external mechanisms of exclusion. Maintaining symbolic boundaries is essential

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<sup>51</sup> Ziad Adwan is a theatre director, publisher and academic. He is a participant in this study. Born in 1976, he studied at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) and King's College in London before completing a PhD in Theatre Studies at Royal Holloway. He taught performance theory, rehearsal systems and mask techniques at the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus. He has also performed on the stage and in film and directed theatre in Syria, England and Germany. In 2010, he became the artistic director of Invisible Stories, a series of street theatre events staged around Damascus. He left Syria in 2013 and now lives in Berlin, where he directs theatre and runs workshops. He is affiliated with the ERC Developing Theatre Project at Ludwig Maximilians-Universitaet in Munich – a research project that proposes a fundamental re-examination of the historiography of theatre in emerging countries. He is also a partner at Tanween Company for Theatre and Dance.

for the survival of a distinct group (Lévi-Strauss as cited in Sciortino, 2012, p. 371). These symbolic boundaries mark the group's culture 'not only as different, but also as "somewhat impermeable"'. While there was little interaction between different groups in the real world, there was certainly circulation of information and interaction between different groups within the dissident intellectual digital sphere. However, it was a type of interaction that, as Sciortino theorised, prevented the creation of a shared space of interpretation (ibid). Consequently, where symbolic boundaries were not maintained by minimising real-world interaction, they were dutifully enforced in the virtual public sphere.

### Fragmentary collectives and political organising

Interview data suggested that the desire to form and belong to collectives was contingent on them being based on consensus. With the exception of online battles, inter-group interaction, collaboration, merging or expansion was practically non-existent. According to Faruk Mardam Bey<sup>52</sup>, this weakened the possibility of transforming friendship-based collectives into politically potent ones.

Developing political programs and organising did not happen at all, not even at the level of Syrian associations in which intellectuals played a vital role which exhibited 'an increasing propensity towards individualism, or small insular clusters of close friends or like-minded people without any attempt, even if some desired it, to take it further' (Personal communication, 2018)

Indeed, a remarkable number of collectives emerged in exile shortly after the immigration wave of 2013/2014. Some were informal and friendship-based such as the so-called [2011 Coordination Committee for Freedom]<sup>53</sup> which has been publishing articles under that pseudonym since 2019, or Haraket Dameer (the conscience initiative) founded in 2016 in Paris by musician Samih Choukeir to 'deepen the commonalities between those who reject tyranny and extremism and aim to confront them'. The collective describes itself as a 'gathering aspiring to build a new, unified and just Syria for all its citizens' (Choukeir, 2016). Other collectives took the form of small non-profit companies such as Bidayyat, which is described as a 'civil non-profit company' (website) and has contributed significantly, through documentary films, to the narration of the Syrian trauma drama. Other registered NGOs include Najoon 'Survivors of the Syrian detention camps' founded by Syrian actor and activist Fares Helou, and Souria Houria: an 'organisation to support the Syrian revolution'.

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<sup>52</sup> Farouk Mardam-Bey is a librarian, historian and publisher. He is a participant in this study. Born in Damascus in 1944, he studied law at Damascus University before moving to Paris to study political science. He has lived in France since 1965. In 1976 he became forcibly exiled, having become wanted by the Syrian regime for his participation in protests against the Syrian invasion of Lebanon and his involvement with the Palestinian resistance. He worked as a librarian at the National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations before being appointed director of the library and cultural advisor at the Institut du Monde Arabe from 1989 until 2008. In 1995, he became director of Sindbad editions of the publishing house Actes Sud and editor of its novels and poetry translated from Arabic. Farouk Mardam-Bey is the author of books, essays and documents on the Arab World. He co-authored the two-volume *Itinéraires de Paris à Jérusalem: La France et le Conflit Israélo-Arabe* (1992) with Samir Kassir, and co-edited a book with Elias Sanbar titled *Jérusalem: Le Sacré et le Politique* (2000). He was awarded the French Knight of the Legion of Honor on July 14, 2018.

<sup>53</sup> *Tansiqiat 'alfinu'iidesh min ajl alhuriya*

Additionally, several collectives formed around online media platforms such as Al Jumhuriya or Syria Untold, which have become some of the most active and celebrated representations of a 'free press' emerging in the wake of the Arab Spring.

According to Faruk Mardam Bey however,

Such groups and initiatives, as dynamic and worthy as they may be, mirror the Syrian nationalist democratic opposition in their atomisation and factionalism, by which I mean the absence of a key actor able to unite them, or at least coordinate various components in order to render them potent in the struggle against the regime on the ground, and in representing the Syrian people in international forums. There is no doubt that these two phenomena - the political vacuum and social fragmentation – are, first and foremost, outcomes of over five decades of dictatorship. (Mardam-Bey, 2016)

Indeed, the atomisation of these groups not only mirrored a divided opposition but also reflected a society fragmenting increasingly under the pressures of decades of dictatorship. Since the 1958 union with Egypt, which brought Syria's brief democratic interval to an end (Krokowska, 2011), the failure of Syria's democratic consolidation has resulted in social fragmentation and political underdevelopment, which could not have formed a strong basis for effective political organising in the democratisation movement of 2011.

#### Generational divides

This section discusses intergenerational tensions within the field, adopting Mannheim's view that the sociology of generations must be seen as a sociology of knowledge in the sense of being a theory of 'the social or existential conditioning of knowledge by location in a socio-historical structure.' (Pilcher, 1994, p. 482). According to this perspective, the formation of a 'social generation' with a distinctive consciousness is more likely in episodes of rapid social change. In this way, contemporaneous individuals and their historical configurations are both constituted by and constitutive of each other in a dialectical and symbiotic relationship. (Abrams, 1982 as cited in Pilcher, 1994, p.489-490)

Following Thorpe and Inglis (2019), Mannheim's original ideas about generations remain my primary resource for navigating the elusive notion. This use of Mannheim manifests at two levels. Firstly, at a broader historical scale, it is possible to construe the entire group of participants as belonging to a single generation, 'the generation of the 2011 revolution' or 'the War generation' whose members are unified by a 'sense of being part of a shared history' (Edmunds and Turner as cited in Thorpe and Inglis, 2019). Within this construct, successive younger generations constitute what Mannheim calls generational sub-units. At the same time, participants self-identified as members of different and mutually antagonistic generations. While this self-identification meets Mannheim's conception of generations as self-conscious entities, it presents the question of whether to construe these antagonistic groups as different generations or generational sub-units within the same one. To resolve this issue, while I accept that participants can be seen as members of one historical generation, following Edmunds and Turner's Mannheimian logic (Thorpe and Inglis, 2019), I construe them as belonging to three different generations based on their own relational self-identification as members of these three generations.

I base this classification on Mannheim's idea that people are particularly influenced by the sociohistorical contexts of their youth. As such, the development of a distinctive historical consciousness or 'generational location' in a sociologically meaningful sense requires not only that individuals are born within the same historical and cultural context but that they are exposed to shared experiences during their formative adult years. Mannheim contrasts this shared generational location, which is usually unconscious and inactive, with a 'generation as actuality' whose members have a 'concrete bond' through their exposure to and participation in the 'social and intellectual symptoms of a process of dynamic destabilization' such as in times of war (Mannheim, 1952, p. 303). Consequently, while all of the three social generations described in the following section have participated in the social and intellectual symptoms of the revolution/war, each entered it from a significantly different sociohistorical context or 'generational location'.

Reference to an intergenerational 'state of animosity' was made in the reviewed literature and during document analysis and fieldwork. In her study of 'older Arab intellectuals', Kassab (2014) examines the positions of a generation of intellectuals born roughly between 1930 and 1950. She suggests that intellectuals recognised the role of their labour in instigating the 2011 movements but acknowledged the limitations of their impact, particularly in comparison with the impact of the youth who were more effective in furthering the theoretical causes intellectuals had been advocating for decades. Al-Haj Saleh (2017b) believes this older generation of intellectuals was shaped by Arab nationalism and progressivism, distinguishing it, in Syria, from a (middle) generation formed in the seventies and eighties and shaped by the struggle with the repressive state, and from a (young) generation formed by the revolution and the complex war that ensued.

In interviews, the generational divide was highlighted on several occasions. Daher Ayta<sup>54</sup>, for example, speaks of a 'great battle' between his (middle) generation of intellectuals and the new one with which 'they are living a state of animosity' (personal communication, 2018).

Young intellectuals complained about a schism with the older generation of established intellectuals using anecdotes to paint an interfiled dynamic of disillusionment, mutual ignorance, arrogance and blame. 'What I want to say is that the older generation does not know the new generation', Ziad Kalthoum<sup>55</sup> told me, summing up one such anecdote. (personal communication 2018)

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<sup>54</sup> Daher Ayta is a novelist, theatre director and playwright. He is a participant in this study. Born in Damascus in 1966, he studied theatre criticism at the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus, where he later taught until his arrest by the Syrian Security Service in November 2012 for his critical position towards the regime. He won the prize for best children's theatre script award at the Arab Theatre Commission's competition in Sharjah for his text *Innocence of a Sailor*. His works include *The Last Moment of Love*, *Dancing with the Stars*, *Guardians of the Environment* and others. In 2010, he published his first novel, *The Last Moment of Love*. He has also been publishing literary and film critique and political opinion pieces for leading Arabic language periodicals.

<sup>55</sup> Ziad Kalthoum is an award-winning film director. He is a participant in this study. Born in Homs in 1981, he completed his film studies in Russia before returning to Syria to work as an assistant director on films, series and television programmes. In 2011, he directed his first short documentary, *Oh, My Heart* (2011), selected for the Carthage Film Festival. In 2013, he completed his first feature-length documentary, *The Immortal*



Intellectuals of the middle and older generation seemed to reciprocate reproach with few exceptions, which I will discuss towards the end of this section. 'I am shocked by the arrogance present among some intellectuals of the new generation' Salam Kawakibi<sup>56</sup> told me, particularly the fixation on the idea that "we were the ones who took to the streets; where were you when we did?". (personal communication, 2018)

While it is unsurprising that younger members of the milieu denounced older ones as authoritarian, the reciprocity of accusations seems less predictable, particularly given the drive among many established intellectuals to fetishize (and attract) the youth. In this excerpt from our passionate discussion at a historic Paris café, journalist and celebrated novelist Samar Yazbek frames her frustration with a younger colleague as part of this inter-generational animosity.

[Intellectual's name] wants to possess the absolute. It's because he considers himself from a generation that has risen during the revolution. Consequently, what was being done before the revolution does not concern him because he was not there! I could have told him to hell with you. Are you Assad?! How could you deny all of Syria? This means Assad was right! We have no literature, no thought; we were nothing, and we deserve to be ruled by the military boot! I am talking about people who are dear to me, and I have confronted them. (Samar Yazbek, personal communication, 2018)

In addition to a proud demeanour (usually attributed to their more prominent role in the movement), disparity of opportunities generated resentment towards younger intellectuals, particularly those who benefited from reportedly 'excessive' attention and support from the

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Sergeant, which addresses the paradoxes of his daily life as a soldier serving mandatory military service in the Syrian Army while working as an assistant director with one of Syria's most prominent film directors Mohammad Malas A Ladder to Damascus. The Immortal Sergeant was screened at the Locarno Film Festival in 2014 and the Fribourg International Film Festival in 2015. In 2017, he released his full-length documentary Taste of Cement which sheds light on exiled Syrian construction workers in Beirut. The film was nominated for several awards, including the European Film Academy Documentary Award Prix Arte and the Best Muhr non-Fiction Feature Award.

<sup>56</sup> Salam Kawakibi is a researcher and commentator on political reform in the Arab world, writing essays, research papers and policy analysis for various publications and organisations. He is a participant in this study. Born in Aleppo in 1965, he completed undergraduate and graduate degrees in Economics and International Relations at Aleppo University and his graduate studies in Political Sciences from l'Institut d'Etudes Politiques in Aix-En-Provence. He holds several academic and civil society positions and is an active member of the opposition. He is the Director of the Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies in Paris, having served as its Deputy Director and of the Arab Reform Initiative. He is also a board member of The Day After association, President of the board of trustees of Ettijahat – Independent Culture, and a member of the Consultative Council of the Mediterranean Citizens' Assembly (MCA). He teaches in the Masters' programme on Development and Migration at Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne. Between 2009 and 2011, he was a principal researcher at the Faculty of Political Science of the University of Amsterdam and between 2000 and 2006, he was director of the Institut Français du Proche Orient (IFPO) in Aleppo, Syria. He has published numerous essays in edited volumes and specialized journals in Arabic, English, French, Spanish and German on topics ranging from human rights to civil society, migration, media, North-South relations, and political reform in the Arab World.

cultural industry in exile, as this excerpt from novelist Rosa Yaseen-Hassan's interview illustrates<sup>57</sup>.

This is a very important question to me because I have noticed that these changes have been impacting me very negatively at the personal level in the last two years. There is an incredible amount [of opportunities]. Ok, so that I am not misunderstood, let me clarify that the more opportunities and creative people of every kind, the better. This is all wonderful. But my generation suffered greatly. We were formed during the rule of Hafez Assad, so we didn't really have opportunities. We were an oppressed generation, a trodden generation... a sad generation. We lived our childhood in the horrors of the 80s and our early youth in the catastrophic nineties. People in the cultural milieu were deprived, except for those inside the circle of power. We were deprived of platforms, of publishing opportunities, activities, support. Most intellectuals of my generation are politically dissident, very few were affiliated with cultural or media institutions. When the revolution began, and we were its main carriers. We thought that things would change and that it was going to be over soon. Then we found out that all these new platform and funding sources resulted in the emergence of a new generation with incredible opportunities, the kind we used to dream of... There's enormous output, I am unable to keep up. And one has to keep up. You can't be a writer and not read what the youth are writing... But many of these texts or creations are not readable, I swear! There's a slackness; a lack of depth and rigor in much of it. (Rosa Yaseen-Hassan, personal communication, 2018)

Compared to their Parisian peers, younger participants in Berlin felt better 'protected' from 'inter-generational animosity': 'there was no older generation, so we were relatively protected from the established groupings and feuds' Ziad Adwan said in our interview (2018). Similarly, Amer Matar told me, 'I'm sure your Paris participants told you about the struggle between the older generation and the new generation. Here there is no old generation, thank God!'

Generational divides intersect with social, ideological and geographical ones and are more the outcome of different social conditions and political circumstances than age. I will begin by describing these differences focusing on 3: ideology, experience and national belonging.

The first area of intergenerational division is ideology. Here I am not referring to the various ethicopolitical positionings discussed earlier but to how intellectuals of different generations related to the very idea of ideology and to meta-narratives more broadly. True of their era, older generation intellectuals adopted grand ideologies like Marxism, Arab

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<sup>57</sup> Rosa Yaseen Hassan is a novelist. Born in Damascus in 1974, she graduated from the architectural engineering faculty at Damascus University in 1998 and worked as a journalist. She published her first book -a collection of short stories - in 2000 and has since written a number of novels including *Ebony* (2004) which won the Hanna Mina Prize, and *Guardians of the Air* (2009) which was longlisted for the Arabic Booker Prize. She was nominated as one of 39 outstanding Arab writers under the age of forty by the Hay Festival's Beirut39 project in 2019. Having taken part in the mass protests against the dictatorship in Syria, Rosa's name was on a list that prevented her from passing checkpoints within the city. She felt that she was 'no longer able to be effective on the ground' and worried that her son who had now been out of school for a year. It was then that she decided to leave. She was smuggled through Beirut and from there to Germany where she accepted a writing scholarship which she had been offered earlier in 2011.

nationalism, Nasserism, Baathism or Syrian Nationalism. These are ideologies from which many diverted, slightly or substantially, over the course of their careers. Contrastingly, the middle generation was prone to theoretical multiplicity (Sing, 2015), while the younger generation of intellectuals was drawn to individualism and often expressed a resentful skepticism towards ideology, not least because they associated it with the regime's 'ideology of the sacredness of the ruler' to use Ismail's (2018) expression, but also because of disenchantment with failed ideologically-driven projects like Arab Nationalism, Nasserism, Soviet Marxism and others (see also Bardawil, 2010).

Scepticism towards ideology began in the 70s and 80s when rising intellectuals like Burhan Ghalioun (b.1945) called for liberation 'from the despotism of ideology' and insisted on the necessity of abandoning any illusions about 'finding solutions in conciliatory, unified ideologies' (cited in Kassab, 2019, p. 97). These early efforts were largely unacknowledged by the young who took the anti-ideological stance to radical horizons after 2011, infusing it with individualistic identitarian overtones that disentangled the 'youth of the revolution' from the 'antiquated' opposition. In turn, older and middle-generation intellectuals problematised the youth's withdrawal from ideology and political parties<sup>58</sup>.

Adopting a global lens, Farouk Mardam Bey (b. 1944) reads this as a symptom of the post-Cold War era where the crisis within socialism was already creating internal conflict in Arab left circles (personal communication, 2018; see also Sing 2017). With the rise of 'brutal capitalism' in the 80s, he reminds us, leftist parties started to retreat, and ideology became contested, especially among youth. In Syria, he suggests, this started in the 80s, but after 2000 the 'anti-ideological stance' became so strong that the youth 'could not fathom how the generation before them used to believe in certain principles and values. To them, this is a deviation; a historical error'. His primary concern, however, was that even after the revolution, when there was a strong need for political thinking, it was absent. Of course, there was some level of organising, he acknowledges, but there was 'no political thought beyond the call for freedom and dignity and the fight against oppression and tyranny as well as against Islamic extremism which are all very basic ideas'. Mardam Bey thinks this was a severe obstacle to the success of the movement because 'scepticism towards ideology translated into reservation towards organising; once you start talking even about a minimal level of organisational structure, you trigger an aversion based on the assumption that it will lead to totalitarianism' (ibid). He attributes the absence of alternatives to the traditional Syrian opposition, which was widely and vehemently criticised, to this avoidance of politics. While one might agree with Mardam Bey that a collective articulation of the movement resulted in the emergence of a cultural identity shaped by the labour of 'a thousand Syrian intellectuals in the diaspora producing remarkable work in theatre, cinema, poetry, novels, etc.' this work did not translate into praxis and as such was unable to produce a political force. Instead, political forces emerged in line with funding opportunities and 'did not accurately represent [the interests and demands] of the Syrian people because they were tied to the political interests of funding states like Saudi Arabia, Qatar or Turkey'.

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<sup>58</sup> Although most middle generation interviewees had been members of political parties at some point in their youth, a rare few were still involved in any form of political organising after exile.

Belonging to the middle generation, novelist Rosa Yaseen-Hassan (born 1974) speaks of ideology with an air of nostalgia perhaps influenced by an admiration towards her father- a writer and a critical intellectual. This is reflected in the way in which she contrasts the two generations in our interview,

It's quite different for us from what it was like for my father's generation. The intellectual of our day does not dream of change. Their dreams are more individualistic, taking an interest in one's own position in the milieu rather than in making a societal impact... There is a general state of rejection towards politics on the premise that politics is filth, a sin or a trap. By contrast, to our fathers' generation, it was a source of pride to be a political intellectual... Rarely will you find an intellectual [of this generation] who is part of a political party or a civil society organisation. The few who were, like in Egypt, Tunisia or Syria, left [the party] and returned to their personal domains. (2018)

While the data collected from young participants supported the view that they denounced ideology, I wish to make two qualifications on the issue. Firstly, inside Syria, the rejection of ideology did not lead to a rejection of organising as demonstrated by the relatively successful and widespread experiment of the 'coordination committees' whose main constituents were youth. The popularity of the coordination committees among the youth was arguably predicated on their horizontal organisation and their alleged non-ideological and apolitical approach to the movement towards democratisation. Having been searching for collective action platforms situated outside militant political organisations and ideologies, when the revolution erupted, these youths, guided by few trusted veteran oppositionists, built the Local Coordination Committees, developed their mechanisms and then connected them through the Syrian Revolution Coordinators Union or (SYRCU). The Committees were manifestly action-driven and ideologically nebulous. Their leaders did not see the need for politicised organisation, despite many of their members being the offspring of or closely related to the figures of the traditional opposition. Perhaps this is precisely why they resisted their models of political organising.

Secondly, I think it was not that rejection of ideology led to withdrawal from political organising but rather that the historical fear of the consequences of being political, and the chronic trauma surrounding surveillance and persecution, led to a rejection of ideology. The generation that was formed during the 80s and 90s knew well from the experience of the generation before them but also from, to speak Foucault, the microphysics of power which they experienced on a day to day basis under dictatorship, what the consequences of organising could be. To satisfy an ideal of bravery, they needed to avoid it on a premise other than fear. It is then possible that the anti-politics anti-ideology positioning served a dual purpose; to assert a generational belonging but also to protect them from self-doubt and guilt. Additionally, since 2000 and the gradual neo-liberalisation of the economy, urban middle-class youth were increasingly influenced by a hope that joining the neo-liberalised economy offered the potential for social mobility and a comfortable life. This contributed an agentic dimension to their focus on the private at the expense of the political.

Rejecting political ideology not only protected the youth of the revolution from persecution and allowed them some personal optimism, but it also offered a clear generation-based anti-positioning that differentiated them from authority figures; subverted age-based hierarchies; and expressed their anger towards multiple oppressions whose responsibility was projected onto 'the older generation'. This was voiced by Berlin-based film director Ziad Kalthoum (b. 1981), who tells me in our interview,

Something is wrong with our relationship; there is no bridge between the older generation and this one, even at the level of father and son. We are a people who grew up being beaten by our parents at home, we went to school and were beaten by our teachers, we left school and were beaten by the regime thugs on the streets, we were taken to the military and floors were swept with our bodies all the way to the grave.

Sulafa Hijazi<sup>59</sup> described the youth's experience as one of 'mounting pressure from every corner; the political system, society, family, father'. She contends that the revolution was at least in part a response to this generalised repression; 'a pursuit of personal freedom and a desire to go out [on the streets] and say *no*, not just to the symbol of Assad but also to the symbolic father.'

As reflected in Rosa Yaseen-Hassan's last quote (p. 91) and as Ziad Kalthoum (b. 1981) conveys in the below excerpt from our interview, ideology was sometimes replaced by a cosmopolitanist individualism with the potential to liberate the cultural actor from collective political responsibility enabling them to conquer a global culture industry operating under a market logic that commodifies meaning even in sociohistorical contexts where its function is most existential. Thus 'Syria' was transformed from a political responsibility and cultural burden to a professional opportunity.

I have reached a conviction that to me, this revolution is an individualistic one, everyone has to work within their own space, and the more their foundation is liberated, intellectually, ideologically, socially, religiously and culturally, the more they are able to reach world stature and address the human in all of us. Conversely, the more they are closed onto themselves, their own background and ideology, the

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<sup>59</sup> Sulafa Hijazi is a director, visual and multimedia artist. She is a participant in this study. Born in Damascus in 1977, she studied at the Higher Institute of the Dramatic Arts and later at the Städelschule Fine Art Academy in Frankfurt Am Main. She began her career as a writer and an animation and multimedia artist receiving several awards, including best animation awards in Hollywood, Russia, India, Cairo and Iran for her feature animation film *The Jasmine Birds* (2009). She was a founding member of Spacetoon, the first free Arabic satellite channel for children and a board member of CIFEJ International Center of Films for Children and Young People from 2012 till 2017. At the beginning of 2010, she established Bluedar, a digital art production house initially operating in Damascus and Beirut and now Berlin. Hijazi's enthusiasm for the protests of 2011 manifested in creating and publishing digital artworks that became highly circulated and often iconic of the uprising. With the dictatorship still in power two years later, she had to leave for Frankfurt in 2013, where she studied contemporary art and started to experiment with a variety of conceptual art and multimedia forms. Her work has been exhibited in several galleries in Europe and featured in online platforms, newspapers, and books. Some of her pieces are now part of acclaimed art collections such as the British Museum in London, Barjeel Art Foundation in Sharjah, and International Media Support (IMS) in Copenhagen.

more they will be limited and insular. (Ziad Kalthoum, personal communication, 2018)

This cosmopolitan individualistic intellectual positioning construed as liberation from political ideology can be situated in a global discourse that has been critical of an earlier generation of 'reckless' intellectuals who, in thinking big developed 'philotyrannical tendencies' (see Lilla, 2001; 2016). It can also be situated in the 'post-communist rediscovery of the individual' that became the antithesis to the collectivism that had theretofore prevailed both Marxism and Arab cultures (Sing, 2015, p. 165). More recently, this type of intellectual positioning became entangled with a populist anti-intellectualism, particularly among those who came to age in the 80s, 90s, and 2000s, as I will argue in Chapter Five.

Perhaps 'the *eros* for knowledge' often 'gets confused with an *eros* for fame or power' as Michael Auckert provoked (2016, p.316) and indeed 'the collapse of the ambitious public agendas of the intellectuals' is a broader phenomenon which has replaced ideological intellectuals of previous generations with a 'more modest, somewhat clueless' type of public intellectual. For these young Syrian intellectuals, fame and power were not pursued *through* ideology. Quite the contrary, their rejection of ideology was not only central to their ability to evade political organising and focus on advancing their personal intellectual, artistic or cultural projects and careers, but by flaunting their individualism (an unimaginable confession for their parents' generation), they positioned themselves within their generation as contemporary, honest, disillusioned and more in touch with reality.

Another difference that fed into hostilities between the youth and the older generations of oppositionists relates to the incorporation of lived experiences into intellectual work. In the older generation, work was generally divorced from the realities of lived life, whether personal experiences or those of the society more broadly. Instead, writings were rife with general impressions which seemed to valorise the theoretical over the empirical (Sing, 2015) and the international over the local with reference to other Syrian authors being a rare occurrence (al-Haj Saleh, 2017b).

Contrastingly, the middle generation integrated 'the witnessed' into their intellectual output, including private and public experiences with a state that sustained an ideology of the sacredness of the ruler (Udwan 2003 cited in Ismail, 2018). While intellectuals in the older generation were children of grand dreams (progress, revolution, universalism) and grand defeats (1948, 1967), the middle generation were the children of closed times (repression, localism) and small defeats (Ismail 2018, p. 126). They had little hope for change but felt responsible for witnessing, documenting and resisting the normalisation of injustice. In reference to the Greek tragic hero, Suzanne Kassab (2019, p. 113) calls this generation Sisyphean because they were 'well aware of the impossibility of effecting any immediate change to Syrian and Arab realities, but at the same time they seem to have felt the urgency of witnessing and presenting alternative, imagined possibilities.' As a result of their sense of urgency to witness and imagine, many spent years or decades in prison, experiences that very much shaped their intellectual trajectories (al-Haj Saleh, 2017b) and were more central to their writings than their (mostly Marxist) ideological backgrounds resulting in confessional writings of a political nature; notably 'prison writings' which became very popular after the first decade of this century.

A strong presence of the lived and the witnessed were also clear in the work of the young generation. Its' older members may have participated in the 2000 Damascus Spring as well as, alongside its younger members, in the 2011 uprisings. In an article comparing three generations of intellectuals, Al-Haj Saleh (2017b) observes how those who came to age during the war have lived through extraordinary personal experiences in a society witnessing sharp contradictions: extreme altruism beside monstrous individualism; extreme trust and comradeship with extreme bigotry and hate; a wide and diverse array of life-experiences set against a diversity of death experiences and the invasion of the world by Syrians set against the invasion of Syria by the world. Al-Haj Saleh (2017b) deems the extreme nature of this generation's experience as often outside available modes of thought and expression. As a result, he contends, silence and other types of escapism permeated their subjectivities, including escape to religion, drugs or underground youth cultures, the latter being particularly prevalent among young artists and writers in Berlin, as we will see in the next chapter. If the older generation was marked by abundant ideologies and absent experiences, then the young generation was marked by the opposite (Ibid). If the older generation was 'Sisyphean' in its futile but persistent labour, then the younger generation was 'Promethean' in as much as its labour was productive, destructive, emancipatory and experience rich. (See Kassab, 2019)

The scale of national identity – i.e. Third-Worldism, Arab nationalism, Syrian nationalism, a-nationalism - was another area of intergenerational difference. Although differences in scales of belonging were less of an area of direct and explicit disagreements, compared, for example, to ideology or lived experience, they influenced intellectuals' outlooks in ways that accentuated intergenerational tensions.

For older intellectuals, identitarian reference often pointed to the Arab World and sometimes to 'developing nations'. They were part of a generation that was raised on the ideas of Arab nationalism and believed, at least for some time, in the project of Arab unity. They saw themselves as Arab Intellectuals rather than Syrian intellectuals per se, and discrepancies between Arab countries received little attention in their writings. Discrepancies with the developed world were equally underplayed, and progress was merely a question of time. The whole notion of the intellectual referred to a transnational culture more than it did to the earthly social and political environments that we live in. This is no small part due to the fact that intellectuals of this generation were formed during the sixties and lived most of their productive lives under a regime that imprisons, tortures, and kills. What they witnessed was political and, as a result, dangerous. Thus, a mode of representation that avoids the witnessed and the specific colluded with a fear of persecution producing a genre of vague and sometimes largely cliché-ridden art and writing. After the Damascus Spring of 2000, and in some cases not until after the revolution of 2011, Syria became the focus of their writings. But as interviews with, for example, Burhan Ghalioun, Farouk Mardam Bey and Nihad Sirees repeatedly showed, they continued to adopt Third-Worldist or pan-Arabist framings of the Syrian political landscape.

The middle generation seemed considerably more Syrian in the sense that *Syria* was the object of its epistemic and political interest. But this does not stem from a nationalist view; rather, it is bred by a life experience that is exclusively Syrian. This generation lived their youthful years in a closed up and culturally isolated Syria during the 70s and 80s. Europe

seemed like a distant world, sometimes accessible for political asylum, but no longer as a model for their own foreseeable future as it was for the older generation. Consequently, the lifeworld of this generation of intellectuals was experienced as radically different from the sources of universal concepts, and therefore the contextualisation and localisation of 'universal' concepts (e.g. Arabizing Marxism) became a popular undertaking in the 70s and 80s. With the cultural turn in the early 80s, however (see Sing, 2015), the idea of contextualisation receded. Focus was turned instead towards local social and political realities approached through a lens of cultural critique and maintaining close proximity to lived experience rather than abstract universal thought and its adaptation or localisation. Ideological input became less absolute (e.g. Marxism) and much less identitarian (e.g. I am a Marxist). It became a source of vaguely applied analytic tools and notions. Additionally, while some independent (non-Baathist) intellectuals of the older generation held positions at Damascus University, particularly in the Philosophy faculty, for the most part, academics in this generation had to be pro-regime or willing to perform loyalty to it. Oppositionists or non-Baathist intellectuals in the middle generation were marginalised and kept predominantly outside universities (Saleh, 2017b) with the exception of the 'oasis of knowledge' that was the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus which was outside the remit of the Ministry of Higher Education and which was able to host a number of critical intellectuals (Adwan, 2020). After 2011, the purge of oppositionist academics took on significantly more radical and violent forms (Al Azmeh et al., 2019). Because of its non-academic formulation and its underground political affiliations, the middle generation produced more militant opinion articles than books or research compared with the older generation. This was also attributable to their purging from state organisations, including universities. Writing opinion articles, the preferred type for the regional Arabic language newspapers that would publish them thus became a source of income. Eventually, with the internet, Arabic language websites took on that role. In this way, the middle generation's situatedness in a culturally isolated Syrian experience, the precariousness of their employment arrangements; the resulting free-floating nature of their affiliations, and their reliance on publishing frequent and relatively short opinion pieces in pan-Arab newspapers shaped a stylistic tendency towards non-empirical, often cursory, subjective, affective and sometimes sensational work. This contributed to positioning them, particularly in the eyes of the younger generation, as 'outdated' in their enthusiasms and their styles and 'limited' in their spheres, their narratives, and their political outlook.

Participants in the younger generation exhibited neither a particularly Arabist nor Syrian sense of belonging. Having realised through their parents' disappointments that they were condemned to being part of a region that is politically thorny, socially hampered and culturally complex, they exhibited a tendency to distance themselves from Arabic culture and adopt a cosmopolitan approach. 'When I was living in London, Syria was not a topic of interest for me. I was in this incredible metropolis, and I wanted to do theatre like everyone else. Even my PhD avoided Syria-specific topics. I like Shakespeare as much as I like Ibsen', Ziad Adwan tells me in our interview.

To them, the notion of Arabism and the seemingly impossible mission of delivering the region from decades of underdevelopment, geopolitical volatilities and corrupt dictatorships seemed difficult and potentially futile as their parents' life-long struggles had often tragically shown them. It may be relevant to add here that while there was no clear gender divide in



the sense of observing gendered patterns in the participants' accounts that would justify the recognition of a fifth gender-based division between participants, a stronger presence for women and for gender issues in the young generation was observable. This manifested in a decline in masculinist modes of thinking and an embracing of 'feminine' and feminist ones among participants of both genders.

Before leaving the discussion on inter-generational dynamics, it may be worth briefly presenting the phenomenon of devotees *mureedeen* which was clearly part of the field's shared language. Some established intellectuals were criticised for rallying young devotees in a relationship whose power dynamics, it is implied, thwart independent and critical thinking and replace it with a type of intellectual dependency and subordination. In this relationship, the older intellectual is offered protection and an air of vanguardism or popularity while giving the younger one validation, social capital and easier intellectual positioning. Two main observations can be made here. Firstly, that there was some scepticism, perhaps even resentment from intellectuals within the same generation towards an intellectual that was popular with the youth, hence the expression 'protégé collector' *ra'i mureedeen*.

It's possible [for an intellectual] to reject engaging in collecting protégés *mureedeen* or at least to control it ... This is a historical phenomenon that exists among all intellectuals in the world... But it restricts critical and independent thinking. (Salam Kawakibi, personal communication, 2018).

Secondly, I suggest a connection between a positive, non-critical, even romanticising attitude towards the youth (usually paired with hostility towards same generation peers) and a propensity to 'collecting protégés'. The phenomenon would make a good topic for further research in as much as it can explore the specificities created by migration and conflict for this common and rather universal phenomenon in the intellectual arena.

### Geographical divide

It became clear early on in the document analysis phase that a divisive binary between domestic and exilic intellectuals was articulated. While this divide is not one *within* the field, it was certainly present in the minds of its actors shaping their discursive environment and social dynamics. Corroborated throughout fieldwork, this binary was denounced by exilic intellectuals as a 'manifestation of the violent Syrian division' (Yazbek); as an 'aggressive' and 'self-righteous' creation of domestic intellectuals (Bahra); a 'terrifying reduction often with a hidden agenda' and a 'tyrannical division which aims to draw valorising comparisons' (Attar). Its service to the regime was often emphasised, and nowhere quite as explicitly as in an interview with Burhan Ghalioun, who said of those who propagate this binary: 'They gave it [the regime] what it wanted; the division of the opposition and the idea that there is a patriotic opposition inside the country and a traitress opposition abroad'.

Despite condemnations of the binary, reductive or patronising generalisations were sometimes made about domestic intellectuals during interviews. For example, many participants construed domestic intellectuals as politically subdued, 'keeping a low profile

and unable to express their views' (Arodaki<sup>60</sup>, personal communication, 2017). They were slotted into three possible positionalities: 'co-optation, corruption or persecution' (Kawakibi, personal communication, 2017). Those who were opposed to the regime were assumed to be 'either completely silent, in prison, or in hiding' (Arodaki, personal communication, 2017). Even though some continued to work in support of the movement, their critical work was marked by the use of 'cunning (*la ruse*) or indirect and inexplicit engagement' with political questions since those who were bolder 'ended up in prison', were 'debased or deprived of work' (Kawakibi, personal communication, 2017), or 'were imprisoned and killed, like Abdulaziz Al Kheir, Rajaa Alnasser and others' (Ghalioun, personal communication, 2017). Thus, instead of a political role, domestic intellectuals were said to be 'playing a role with the youth, in relief work or awareness work' (Arodaki, personal communication, 2017), and this role was implicitly construed by exilic intellectuals as inferior.

While there is a lot of truth in the limitations described, the articulation of differences was likely as much a result of the antagonistic binary as it was cause for its entrenchment. The implication was that exilic intellectuals were true revolutionaries while most domestic intellectuals, by remaining inside the country, had become reformists. Some were perceived to have 'shifted to a position of appeasement with the regime' as Paris-based poet Hazem Azmeh<sup>61</sup> suggested in one of our discussions (personal communication, 2018) and were thus 'no longer on the side of the revolution'. Others were said to believe (or, according to some accounts, *pretended* to believe) that revolution is not in the country's best interest at this time and that change should be channelled through the regime. This conciliatory position may accurately reflect the official views of some domestic opposition organisations (e.g. the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change). But it was erroneously ascribed

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<sup>60</sup> Badreddine Arodki is a writer and translator in the fields of literary and film criticism. He has been writing political opinion articles since 2011. He is a participant in this study. Born in Damascus in 1942, he obtained degrees in law and literature at Damascus University. He started his career with the Syrian magazine *Al-Taleea* (The Vanguard) before briefly serving as director of planning and film studies at the Public Institute for Cinema in Damascus. In 1972, he travelled to Paris, where he completed a PhD in sociology at the University of Paris. He settled in France in 1981. During his doctoral dissertation, he worked for UNESCO and then held several positions at the Institut Du Monde Arabe in Paris, where he was appointed assistant director-general from 2008 to 2012. He was one of the founders and later director of the Arabic language magazine "The Seventh Day". He published a number of studies in the sociology of culture and has been a visiting editor-in-chief for an issue of the French language Magazine *Littéraire*. His translations cover over thirty books ranging from novels and studies to sociologies and histories included works by Suzanne Taha Hussein, Jose Saramago and Milan Kundera.

<sup>61</sup> Hazem Azmeh is a poet, academic and medical doctor. He is a participant in this study. Born in 1946, he studied medicine at Damascus University and completed his clinical training in pulmonology at the University Hospital Llandough in Wales. It was not until 2004 that he published his first poetry collection titled *Poems of Andromeda*. In 2006 he published *Short Road to Aras* and in 2012, *Front of the Chariot Edge of the Night*. He is a co-signatory of the 'Statement of the 99', a statement made by 99 Syrian intellectuals in September 2000 during the Damascus Spring calling for the return of civil rights and demanding to 'free public life from the laws, constraints and various forms of surveillance imposed on it'. He quickly became an outspoken supporter of the 2011 uprising against the Assad regime, which resulted in his internal displacement and eventual exile in 2014.

to 'domestic intellectuals' as a whole and, in this way, intensified the drift. The general view from the perspective of exilic intellectuals was that 'If you want to work, you need to be outside'. Sometimes there seemed to be an assumption not only that leaving the country was a choice - 'They *insisted* on staying and on accommodating the regime so as not to get killed' (Ghalioun, personal communication, 2018) but also that it was a duty; that staying inside the country meant you were giving up on the movement.

We told them you cannot take serious positions and move forward while you are inside; you need to come outside ... But they didn't. Instead, they made concessions to the regime and told it that the National Council [the main oppositionist organisation operating in exile] is working towards international intervention. (Ghalioun, personal communication, 2018)

The conciliatory position of domestic intellectuals was mostly posited as a circumstantial compromise patronisingly described as 'understandable' and temporary for 'as soon as they go abroad, they change their position' (Ghalioun). But even where justifications were given, there seemed to be a focus, particularly among veteran exiles (i.e. older generation participants who had left Syria several decades ago), that the construction of a politically radical discourse is the only meaningful type of work an intellectual can undertake and that it was impossible to do from within the country.

Furthermore, there was a perception that, for the most part, the type of critical work coming from domestic intellectuals was ultimately benign and inadvertently had the effect of legitimising the regime. For example, Meyar Roumi<sup>62</sup> told me in our interview that

With the death of Hafez Assad in 2001, there was a shift in Syrian society which clarified that this intellectual community that was being oppressed would not be able to impact any change to threaten the Baathist machine, so [the regime thought], let's amuse ourselves with it; monitor it, impose travel bans. If some go live abroad, good riddance. At the same time, they needed the kind of image that this benign opposition created because they were starting to build positive relations with Europe and wanted to say that intellectuals were able to exercise freedoms as long as they direct their message abroad and light is shed on it to show that the regime is tolerant. These are all matters that the regime understood, and intellectuals played along.

By contrast, exilic intellectuals emphasised the advantage of having freedom of expression and the ability to be radical in exile. Despite being isolated and relatively out of touch with

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<sup>62</sup> Meyar Al Roumi is a cinematographer and film director. He is a participant in this study. Born in Damascus, Syria, in 1973, Al Roumi studied at the Faculty of Fine Arts at Damascus University and worked as a photographer before travelling to Paris to study cinema at the University Paris VIII and later at the Fondation Européenne pour les Métiers de l'Image et du Son (La Fémis); the film and television school of PSL Research University from which he graduated in 2001. He has worked as a director of photography on a number of documentary and fiction films in France and Syria. As a director, he has made a number of documentary films, including, *A Silent Cinema* (2001), *Waiting for the Day* (2003), and *Le Club de l'avenir* (2006). In 2007, he completed a feature-length documentary that paints the portrait of a few taxi drivers in Damascus: *Six Ordinary Stories*. In 2019 he co-scripted and directed *Les 1001 visages de Palmyre* (ARTE, 2019). His fiction films include *The Voyage of Rabeya* (2005) and *Journey* (2011) and the recent first feature-length fiction film, *The Return* (2019).

the lived realities of Syrian society, a limitation they, for the most part, acknowledged but underplayed, they felt that they were able to maintain close contact with their networks inside Syria and as such remain politically engaged and relevant. In fact, their geographical remoteness from their home society was sometimes embraced as a positive position enabling better ‘critical distance’, understanding and objectivity.

In addition to the assumption that leaving Syria was a choice and a duty, as discussed earlier, the idea that domestic intellectuals were not doing ‘revolutionary work’ was also inaccurate. Many domestic intellectuals were putting their lives at great risk by writing and publishing pseudonymously from and about inside Syria<sup>63</sup>, leading important clandestine aid work outside the limitations of state charities<sup>64</sup>, or contributing vital educational and cultural work<sup>65</sup> with a focus on the marginalised and displaced inside the country.

It is important to note that there were voices that contested the oversimplistic and inaccurate view that exilic intellectuals had freedom while domestic ones had proximity. They protested that it ignored the important work being done domestically.

There are many voices coming from inside. They [domestic intellectuals] haven’t given up. They are writing and working as much as we are, probably more. Some write under pseudonyms, others I’m not sure how, have some sort of immunity, including from international organisations. (Daher Ayta, personal communication, 2018)

It is also important to note that even after describing hostilities, participants consistently felt the need to clarify that despite their ‘weak position’, insider intellectuals were ‘very important’ and were still able to ‘work through long-term projects, existing organisations and local councils’. What was contested was that they established a hierarchy of legitimacy in which they claimed the upper hand. ‘They should stay not in order to divide the opposition but in order to expand its social network and to do [on the ground] work’, Burhan Ghalioun told me aggravatedly in our interview. When I asked whether he thought they were actually doing this kind of work, he replied, ‘I am not following their activities, but I know some of the new and young activists are. I think the established parties and their intellectuals are mostly no longer active.’

Despite such caveats, the importance of exilic intellectuals’ freedom to write about Syria and to ‘deliver the message to the international community’ was overestimated in some accounts, especially considering, as other accounts suggested, ‘international powers

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<sup>63</sup> To offer a few examples, one might mention Hazem Mustafa and Ahmad Al Saleem, pseudonyms of regular contributors to Syria Untold - an independent and critical online media platform as well as several pseudonymous writers for Al Jumhuriya and other leading media platforms of the revolution.

<sup>64</sup> Particularly between 2011 and 2013 when the regime made it near impossible to carry out any independent aid work

<sup>65</sup> For example, IW is an architecture and urban planning office whose research focuses on critiquing property rights violations by the regime, particularly Law No. 10 of 2018: a legal scheme intended to enable the Syrian government to designate land anywhere in the country for redevelopment threatening residents in informal settlements with urban clearance projects.

[already] know everything, and in the age of satellites this is somewhat an obsolete role' as Samira Mobaied<sup>66</sup> alleged in our interview. Furthermore, with very few exceptions, as discussed, exilic intellectuals weren't on the whole actively engaging in organised political work. Focusing, with very few exceptions, on important but politically ineffective cultural work, they knew they too had a limited if any political impact. For the most part, they understood this very well but continued to use their freedom of expression, perhaps defensively, in the insider/outsider hierarchisation process.

All of this brought to the surface ethical questions related to complicity and intellectuals' right to continue to work under the dictatorship and within its frameworks and limitations as necessary. Despite an initial boycott of cultural activities, with time, most domestic intellectuals returned to the domestic cultural field. On the whole, exilic intellectuals defended their right to continue to do so. In these discussions, a distinction between state and regime emerged, with those in exile leaning towards the argument that in a context like Syria, the two are indistinguishable. Those who remained in close contact and good rapport with peers inside the country, or who were able to travel back, like Jumana Al-Yasiri<sup>67</sup>, leaned towards making that important distinction between regime and state; a distinction which was crucial for legitimising engagement with public institutions by dissident intellectuals and cultural actors inside Syria. Al-Yasiri explains:

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<sup>66</sup> Samira Mobaied is an academic researcher in Eco-Anthropology. She is a participant in this study. Born in Damascus, she completed her undergraduate studies at Damascus University, where she later became a faculty member before going to Paris to complete her master's and doctoral degrees. She was in Paris when the 2011 uprisings broke out and immediately became involved in the movement cofounding and joining several civic groups, including Syrian Christians for Peace, Renaissance des Femmes Syriennes and Liberimage. She is also a founding member and board member of several political groups, including the Syrian Bloc Takattol Al Sooriyin, the Nucleus Group Majmoo'at Nawat, the Damascus National Charter, and the Declaration of Federal Syria. She participated in the Syrian political dialogues for peacebuilding in Syria and represented the Civil Society Bloc in the Syrian Constitutional Committee. She has published two books in Arabic: *How to See the Syrian Revolution* and *The First Syrian Martyr*, in addition to a large number of articles in Arabic and French.

<sup>67</sup> Jumana Al-Yasiri is a Syrian-Iraqi performing arts manager, curator, researcher and translator. She is a participant in this study. Born in Damascus, she completed a BA in Theatre Studies from Damascus Higher Institute for Dramatic Arts and an MA in Comparative Literature from the University Paris VIII. She was appointed curator for the Urban and World Music Program of Damascus Arab Capital of Culture in 2008 and held the position of Grants Manager at the Young Arab Theatre Fund - currently Mophradat - from 2011 to 2014. In 2015, she was appointed as the Middle East and North Africa Manager at the Sundance Institute Theatre Program, co-leading the development and the implementation of the program's outreach in the Arab region. For five years, this programme brought her to contribute to the development of new works by theatre makers from the Arab region and the diaspora through a series of labs and residencies. Previous board member of the Roberto Cimetta Fund for Artistic Mobility in the Euro-Arab Region, Jumana was also selected to be part of the inaugural Fellows cohort at The Laboratory for Global Performance and Politics at Georgetown University. She has been based in Paris since 2010, working between Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, and the United States.

Why should Syrians be punished for staying in their country? They can't do political work, but they can do social work and educational work. Recently, the municipality launched a project, and many domestic artists and writers collaborated. Because it's important that they do, these are government organisations, and it's important to separate between the government and the regime. Many people will emphasize this; that these government organisations are *ours*. It is our right to work with them and to achieve through them our objectives. (Personal communication, 2018)

In attempting a sociopsychological reading of exilic intellectuals' ambivalent (critical-but-conforming) stance towards the insider-outsider binary, one might agree with some participants' allusion to forces of self-doubt and self-justification at play. When exilic intellectuals overstate the impossibility of working inside the country or insinuate the inferiority of relief or educational work, they are arguably trying to ease their own qualms about their life as exiles. Mohammad Abou-Laban suggested that such attitudes are ultimately a 'defence of their choice [to leave]'. They construct 'exclusionary narratives' and 'construe those who stayed as collaborators or conciliators' in order to reconcile with their own struggle as exiles (personal communication, 2018).

Additionally, as discussed earlier, underlying their classification as 'exilic intellectuals' was an undermining of the legitimacy of their political role. To put it in blunt terms, I borrow the words of a participant who might be described as situated on the periphery of the exilic intellectual field<sup>68</sup>: 'some intellectuals who took on political roles were effective when they were inside, but when they fled, they seemed absurd. Their legitimacy came to question, particularly those who depended a lot on their presence on the ground' (Anonymous, personal communication).

Consequently, for the most part, they refuted the classification while accepting the idea of 'freedom at the expense of proximity', which already implies some kind of division, at least of roles, advantages, and disadvantages. In this revealing paragraph from our interview, Yassin al-Haj Saleh starts by repudiating the outsider category:

When you have six million Syrian humans outside Syria, there is no longer an inside and an outside. A quarter of the population is outside the country. We brought a quarter of Syria with us. A *quarter*! Are we outside then? So, from that perspective, I don't see it as an apt binary. (Personal communication, 2018)

But at the same time, and immediately following the above-quoted statement, he acknowledges the division of privileges between domestic and exilic intellectuals:

[T]here is no doubt that our life abroad offers us important spaces of freedom and capacity for action. But there is also no doubt that day after day, the things we know about the Syria we left behind are becoming less relevant. The Syria we brought with us we know well, but [the new one is lost to us] ... I am cognisant of this dilemma and the solution as I see it is that we, who are outside, should work with different tools. There is

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<sup>68</sup> Like all cultural fields (Cattani et al., 2014), the exilic Syrian one is permeated by an oppositional structure in which established players enforce norms and standards that conform to their specific interests, while peripheral players try to advance alternative views and display a propensity to produce work that departs from the field's expectations at the risk of limiting their chances of embeddedness into the centre.

no need to pretend that we are fully aware of everything that is happening in Syria... one does not only gain knowledge from reading books but also when walking the streets and seeing things ... It is for this reason that I now work in a different way and address different topics; topics that are less connected with the quotidian and more focused on the *longue durée*... I hope deeper too, in the sense of approaching depths or lengths which were previously unseen. So, these are some of the tools that allow us to connect with our cause while we are outside the country.

From a positionist perspective, one might argue that the recurrent idea that domestic intellectuals had proximity while exilic ones had freedom was compatible with exiled intellectuals' need to carve out a new role for themselves in exile; one that shifts focus from the local and the quotidian to the international and the theoretical. Such focus was much better suited for new their new professional context and for an international audience. This universalising shift will be the focus of the next chapter.

### Social Identity and Subnational Belongings

Social divisions around subnational social categories such as religious sect, social class, and urban-rural splits were central to the field. Sectarianism was a particularly dominant topic approached critically as a social phenomenon. And yet subnational belongings, while expectedly more subtle within the intellectual field, were present and contributed to its fragmentation.

Scholars have suggested the primacy of social identity over ideology in organising social solidarity in the Arab region where, it is suggested, ideologically based solidarity is undermined by the logics which structure relations of regional, familial and sectarian solidarity (Bardawil, 2018). This was particularly visible in Lebanon where, as Lebanese scholar Fadi Bardawil observes with Waddah Charara, underneath the unifying ideological veil of Left and Right, lurked more fundamental and multiple regional, familial and sectarian loyalties which precluded the articulation of a unified political project and called into question the validity of concepts such as 'dominant ideology' and 'unified political society' (2018, p.177).

This study suggests that, in the case of exilic Syrian intellectuals, ethicopolitical positioning was not traceable to social identity and subnational social belongings. While categories like religious sect, social class and rural-urban divide were clearly operational in the field, they were weaker than the influence of ethicopolitical positioning and generational belonging in shaping relationships of solidarity. This is clearly influenced by the scope of the study being *exilic* intellectuals which a priori defines a shared oppositionist ethicopolitical position. And yet, social identity did factor into the nuances within that position in complicated ways, as the following pages try to illustrate.

Historically, class, religious sect and the rural-urban divide are notoriously entangled in Syria (e.g. Faksh, 1984 ). This complicates traditional approaches to *déclassé* models of studying intellectuals (e.g. Pierre Bourdieu and Michele Lamont) and necessitates the treatment of class, sect and rural-urban belonging as an integrated manner.

According to *déclassé* theories, intellectuals, having descended from a position of class privilege, have come to use ideas as pathways to reclaiming their social status by enabling a lower class to rise, and themselves with it (Alexander, 2017, p. 105). This model did not resonate with the data, perhaps because in the current Syrian context, most middle and young generation intellectuals descend from rural minoritarian backgrounds. This came with the shift in the class backgrounds of Syrian politics in the 60s and 70s when opportunities became available for rural lower economic strata and minority groups to be 'at the forefront of Syrian political life, which in turn would bring about drastic socio-economic and political benefits for the rural poor and members of religious minorities who had previously been ignored' (Faksh, 1984, p. 142). The fact that these shifts were the result of a conscious Baathist strategy complicated both inter-intellectual rapport and the relationship between intellectuals and the masses. Here I will address the former while the latter will be the focus of Chapter Five.

When it comes to inter-intellectual rapport, attention to the intertwined class, region and religious-sect dynamics underlying relationships between intellectuals is important for understanding the field<sup>69</sup>. Already notoriously complicated, inter-intellectual power dynamics were further complicated by a class shift in which the levelling of the field was largely the outcome of a conscious Baathist strategy that aimed to create its own intellectual class *muthaqaf alsulta* often by attempting to manipulate sectarian loyalties. This was partly attempted by adopting a support-to-co-opt approach by which minority artists and writers, particularly Alawite, were 'practically certain of preferential treatment in appointments and promotions in government' (Faksh, 1984, p. 146). The outcome was an increase in the numbers of minority group intellectuals and a resulting dual economy of power relations, one related to intellectual pedigree and family background and the other to current socioeconomic status and access to political power. The co-optation strategy sometimes resulted in phenomena like 'commissioned criticism' (Cooke, 2007), where the work of self-proclaimed critical intellectuals is strategically appropriated by the regime. But it did not always succeed in nurturing sectarian loyalties, as testified by the six participants in this study who descend from Alawite backgrounds. All of these participants positioned against the regime well before the uprisings of 2011, including any who seem to have benefited from sect-based in-group favouritism. The fact that they were anti-regime and that they were mostly irreligious does not, however, neutralise the influence of sectarian belonging in inter-field relations<sup>70</sup>. The impact of a shared identity between Alawite intellectuals and a sectarian state left them subject to scepticism in the field. Ziad Kalthum explains this to me in our interview,

I was demonised by both regime loyalists and revolutionaries. After a screening of my film, one artist expressed scepticism towards my [anti-regime] position. He asked me why I'm not fighting with the revolutionaries. He must have guessed my sect from my last name, although personally, I believe in no religion or sect, and he was unsure what

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<sup>69</sup> Class here is defined as a cultural, not economic, phenomenon. It is related less to income brackets than to family name, urban/rural divide, pedigree and other sources of cultural and social capital.

<sup>70</sup> By sectarianism, I do not mean specific forms of religiosity, but the role of socioreligious belonging in shaping social interactions.



to make of this Alawite who is making a film against the regime but will not fight alongside the FSA [Free Syrian Army] either. (Ziad Kalthum, personal communication, 2018)

This twofold identity – Alawite and oppositionist – sometimes left its carriers torn between their familial or social ties and their commitment to the movement.

My family is Alawite. They are all regime supporters. They would point their fingers at my brother and me: “you did this. Look what you’ve done”. Of course, your immediate response is a clear “no, it was not us; it was the [regime’s] atrocities that caused this”. But during the low I experienced in 2012, I did feel that guilt was one of the keywords controlling my life now. (Ziad Adwan, personal communication, 2018)

This sense of guilt was sometimes directed at their participation in the movement, but other times it was related to their sectarian belonging itself. In their reply to my generic question about guilt, several participants from Alawite backgrounds automatically connected this question with the topic of sectarianism. For example, Amal Omran<sup>71</sup> told me,

I used to [experience a sense of guilt]. It has to do with being from this sect and the fact that atrocities were being committed mostly by it. It was more like collective guilt. It’s because people treat you as an Alawite. Although I don’t subscribe to any sect, I feel that it is part of the collective memory that I belong to. (Personal communication, 2018)

Some Alawite participants’ focus was instead on denouncing the rise of anti-Alawite sentiments within the movement. For example, when Rosa Yaseen-Hassan refers to ‘intellectuals who have developed a frighteningly sectarian discourse during the revolution’, she is primarily referring to anti-Alawite sentiment related to conflation within the field between the regime and its sect.

There was a widely shared belief that such sectarianism was the product of the regime’s strategy to foster subnational belongings ‘so that it remains the only truly Syrian entity’ (Yassin al-Haj Saleh, personal communication, 2018). According to Rosa Yaseen-Hassan this was done through ‘the restriction or elimination of the public sphere resulting in eliminating bonds based on mutual interest and nurturing those based on subnational belongings. (Personal communication, 2018).

And despite its co-optation strategy and attempts, the regime was seen by its sect’s exiled intellectuals as not only tyrannical towards all Syrians but particularly unjust towards Alawites, whom it instrumentalised in order to secure its rule. ‘In my opinion, Hafez Assad destroyed Alawism as a religion and as a sect. Even demographically, now they are reduced

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<sup>71</sup> Amal Omran is an actress and theatre director. She is a participant in this study. Born in 1967, she graduated from the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus before travelling to the United States and Czechoslovakia for further training. She is considered one of the pioneers of Syrian theatre and has contributed significantly to Syrian theatre, notably through her key role and co-founder of the Teatro Institute for the Performing Arts in Damascus aimed at discovering young talent away through creative pedagogy. Having participated in the 2011 protests, she became subject to harassment, including a travel ban and ‘a heinous investigation’ at the border’s political security checkpoint. When she was told that ‘things have gotten serious’ for her, she decided not to return to Syria, working firstly in Beirut, then Algeria, Turkey and ultimately France, where she applied for asylum. She has been working between France and Germany since.

to a population of 1,200,000, of which 70% are women, children and elders' Samar Yazbek (personal communication, 2018) said in reference to the men who have died fighting for Assad.

We can then speak of a majority of rural *parvenu intellectuals* asserting their place in the field and a smaller group of urban *déclassé intellectuals* replacing lost class status with intellectual status. Between the two was a large category of what one might refer to as *survivor intellectuals* writers, and artists who had neither pedigree nor access to new power. Most veteran political prisoners came from that group since they were neither hindered by middle- and upper-class reservation towards activism nor did they have access to social capital that might protect them from the consequences of any such activism. Based on participant observation as well as non-verbal cues during interviews, the assertion of status seemed to manifest in a most salient form among *parvenu* and sometimes *survivor intellectuals*. What was clearly observable was a more deliberate performance of status and/or knowledge, particularly among men in this category, compared to others in the field. Barring the kind of understanding that comes with psychosocial explanations for such performance, their attitude was called out, criticised and sometimes mocked, particularly harshly by younger members of the milieu and sometimes by feminist peers of their own generation.

With some reflexive reservation, I would then suggest that the Syrian version of the *déclassé* model for the study of intellectuals would consider not only a *nostalgia for lost status* (among a small group of older intellectuals who descend from the top of Syria's historical, social hierarchy) but also how it relates to the *assertion of new status* (among a larger group of *parvenu* and *survivor* intellectuals who descend from the lower ranks of the historical, social hierarchy). Some of these intellectuals sacrificed their youth for the struggle against dictatorship, a cause which all three categories supported but in which *déclassé* intellectuals were seen to be more implicated than they realised. The following comment from al-Haj Saleh's about Sadiq Jalal Al-Azm offers some insight into this dynamic. Al-Azm, who died of cancer in 2016 at the age of 82, was a Marxist Damascene philosopher from a bourgeois family who has always been opposed to the Assad regime but who accepted a position at the faculty of philosophy in Damascus University from 1977 to 1999. Al-Azm's ostensible 'sense of guilt' and complicity that al-Haj Saleh alludes to in the following may be read as blame - by Saleh.

I met Sadiq in 2001. His life ended honourably, politically and ethically speaking. I think he suffered a sense of guilt. He witnessed the indignity of the 80s and the 90s... I read most of his writings, and I have the feeling that he didn't like who he was then, and so it was as if he was seeking vengeance. (Personal communication, 2018)

Underlying this subtle critique is a reversal of power dynamics: generational, class-related and in relation to institutional cultural capital (given Al-Azm's international recognition as an academic).

The rise of the social power of the minoritarian was achieved via the regime's systematic 'marginalising [of] Syria's Sunni community, turning it into a demonised underclass' (Massouh, 2013, p.54; see also Faksh, 1984). For example, on a somewhat anthropological note, one revealing manifestation of such power politics is the degree to which rural cultural elements became fetishised and overperformed in the past few decades, becoming part of

the habitus and its self-positioning repertoire. Influenced by broader societal power dynamics and the affinity between the rural and the powerful, the embracing, almost flaunting the rural has altered the field's hierarchies whereby the superiority of Westernised upper-class signifiers common in postcolonial Syria was now replaced by the fetishisation of local rural ones, e.g. drinking maté<sup>72</sup> and listening to rural music *jabali shabi* to counter urban intellectuals' interest in wine and classical music in a populist performance of coarseness<sup>73</sup>.

A number of anecdotes recorded in fieldnotes also referred to what Salwa Ismail (2018) observes as a common phenomenon in intellectual circles in 2000s Syria where reviewing and scrutinising peers' past political trajectories and positionalities vis-à-vis the Assad regime was a common dynamic. She notes that in these reviews, a 'line of division was drawn between those who spent time in prison and those who bent with the tide of repression' with such division being 'expressed in accusations and indictments'. Ismail further separates between these lines of division and polarisation and 'the emergent trajectories of activism that began with the civil-society movement in the early 2000s and that culminated in the 2011 Uprising' (Ismail, 2018, p. 129). While such divisions do not map neatly to the urban/rural divide, it was evident that fewer urban middle-class intellectuals were in the 'survivor intellectual' category. Symbolic capital was being renegotiated by *survivor intellectuals* in acknowledgement of the incredible sacrifices they made in the fight against dictatorship. In these negotiations, the symbolic capital acquired through such sacrifice not only trumped traditional sources of social status such as class and traditional modes of cultural capital but also reconstructed them as shameful. With a significant shift over the past four decades, class was still central in the dynamics of the Syrian intelligentsia, not merely as nostalgia for lost status but also as class redress.

### Intra-field competition

So far, this chapter has examined processes of group building which were animated by latent antagonisms brought to the surface after 2011. But these tensions were also impacted by the emergence of new opportunities in exile, which intensified the competitive dimension of intra-field relations.

Power struggles within the field manifested in both *material* and *discursive* domains. Within the material domain, it was mainly among rising intellectuals and artists competing for jobs or access to a wave of EU and NGO funding opportunities for cultural projects peaking in 2015 and 2016. Within the discursive domain, a specific type of power struggle takes centre stage; *a competitive performance of radicality*<sup>74</sup>. It is distinguished by discursive competition

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<sup>72</sup> This is a herbal drink that has become symbolic of a rural identity (particularly Alawite or Druze) in Syria.

<sup>73</sup> This is not dissimilar to the global phenomenon of 'middle-class embarrassment' and the increasing fetishization/commodification of working-class culture, lifestyle, language and music.

<sup>74</sup> It might be worth pausing for a moment here to clarify the relationship between the examination of fragmentary collectives based on ethicopolitical positioning described earlier and between the discursive struggle that will be described in this section. While they are certainly connected, the first is concerned with

being centred not around ‘the truth’ of the matter or validity of arguments and claims, but first and foremost around a righteous moralist approach to radicality. This phenomenon was most pronounced among younger intellectuals attracted to enclaves of alternative culture in their host societies or by a victim subjectivity exoticized by these societies.

Both types of competition – material and discursive - will be approached from the perspective of participants. Because it is impossible to measure intentionality, I will focus more on how these ways of competing were observed, articulated, and evaluated by participants rather than try to establish whether competitive motives did indeed underlie intra-field disputes. It is the effects of these collective self-descriptions on the field and its relationships that are of interest here.

While recognising the interconnectedness of materiality with narrative (Alexander et al., 2012, p. 22), for clarity of structure, I will present material and narrative competition separately with the understanding that they are different but intertwined structures.

#### Competing in the material domain

Power struggle in the material domain was clearest among emergent writers and artists living in Germany, where funding opportunities<sup>75</sup> for Syrian artists, writers, filmmakers and other cultural projects were abundant shortly after the first refugee wave in 2015. These funding opportunities contributed to the creation of a flourishing transnational Syrian cultural scene, and their beneficiaries represented a wide range of artistic, literary and intellectual domains.

In her report on the impact of EU funding on Syrian artists, Greta Galeazzi (2014) describes support ranging from invitations to participate in international exchanges, festivals and exhibitions; workshops; production grants; subsidies awarded to emerging digital journalism structures; and research on human rights and cultural policy. While I may not agree with Galeazzi that such funding helped bring Syrian art and culture into the domain of opposition and political protest, since art and culture were central to the repertoires of contention and present in protests and online activism from the very beginning, there is no doubt that such grants supported and sustained creative activists, encouraged the continuation of protest and trauma work through art well after exile, and profoundly enriched Syrian culture.

Because of the competitive nature of such funding, positioning a project or an intervention in a way that seemed appealing to funders was crucial to its creator’s subsistence. Failing to meet the requirements of funding, listed clearly in calls for proposals, and to align with funders’ narrative preferences and cultural nuances - less explicitly available - meant missing out on these funding opportunities and potentially struggling to secure a livelihood.

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how the discursive was used in group-making mechanisms and creating solidarity, whereas the latter is concerned with how the discursive was used for establishing self-distinction and competition within the field.

<sup>75</sup> Leading organizations in this regard include Prince Claus Fund for culture and development, Heinrich Böll Foundation, Roberto Cimetta Fund, British Council, IDFA Bertha Fund, Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (AFAC), Al Mawred Al Thaqafy, Danish Centre for Culture and Development, Kultur im Turm, Ibsen Awards and others.

Surprisingly, in the participants' experience, this did not put those most at home in a globalised cultural field at an advantage. Quite the contrary, there was a tendency for funding to attract genres deemed as authentically local based on preconceptions of what constituted a faithful representation of the guest culture. According to Yazji and Abou Laban (personal communication, 2017), it was often cultural expressions that emphasised the otherness of the refugees and their culture that were most appealing. This resulted in competitive friction between two groups of actors demarcated by cultural capital and habitus and largely based on exposure to, fluency in and attitudes towards the host culture. Unlike Bourdieu's conception of cultural capital, where resemblance to power facilitates social mobility, here difference, even exoticism, were key. In this competitive friction, the localisers and the cultural populists were often at an advantage. Facebook posts were, for example, published into books, and light critically unacclaimed poetry was translated into European languages so long as they reflected an exoticised image of the rural, uneducated and masculinist Arab. By comparison, those engaging with a more globalised cultural language, highly educated and well-versed in its Western canon, experienced a stark depreciation of the cultural capital they enjoyed when operating within Syria, but not their sense of symbolic supremacy.

Positioning in favour of funding took many forms. Examples are not hard to uncover, and they ranged from the aesthetically contrived to the politically unethical. Some manifested in simple adjustments of language and tone, others in self-exoticisation, orientalist adaptations of trendy topics or instrumental alignment with funders' interests. Many of the study participants problematised this phenomenon even when they participated in it. Some attributed it to inadequate mechanisms of cultural funding. Liwaa Yazji, for example, suggested that 'ignorance about the calibre and nature of the Syrian cultural scene' was creating an 'arrogant exoticisation of weak art and writing', one which stems from a position of pity and which is resulting in the celebration of mediocrity and exacerbating the inferior position of Syrian refugees in Europe (personal communication, 2017). This she believes is not only a misrepresentation of Syrian art and culture but also a commercialised exoticisation that marginalises serious and deserving cultural actors (Ibid). She regrets that many Syrian artists are forced to waste their energies in obtaining subsidies instead of concentrating on their aesthetic and intellectual priorities. And warns that by linking cultural funding with predominantly political considerations, 'Syrian art will eventually become exclusively an art of the crisis' (as cited in Kassab Hassan, 2015)

While funding bodies and mechanisms were questioned, most participants blamed the applicants themselves. One anonymous participant complained that alignment with funding organisations or employers weakened their activist groups because it influenced narrative so much that it thwarted the passionate enthusiasm characteristic of activism work (Anonymous participant, February 23, 2018). Another participant criticised applicants' meek attempts to appease self-absolving narratives in host societies. He told me,

This is why I am angry at our writers and artists. They are absolving the world's obscenity by offering entertainment; Daesh, ISIS, factions, all these buzzwords are unhelpful. All they do is strengthen a narrative in which they [the host societies] have nothing to do with our situation, in which the mayhem is our own internal problem. They are reassuring them: "you are not part of it". We write for them what they want.

We implement what they're thinking; we come as refugees at their feet, ready to please [...] All they are doing is recycling the dominant narrative because they want to market themselves, escape, and open [intellectual] shops *dakakeen*; so that they survive. So that they get recognised. (Ayham Majeed-Agha)

Similarly, Kawakibi's interest in the term 'Arabes de service' reflects his disapproval towards a willingness to be co-opted in the service of the discourse of European right-wing politics in exchange for opportunities, as he explained to me in our interview (2018). The term describes people of Arab origin whose 'inferiority complex drives them to support, exaggerate and outdo discourses which are seen as proof of loyalty helpful in their integration into French society' (Kawakibi, 2009)

I do not wish to imply that this criticism towards peers is reducible to competitive hostility. There are certainly strong ethical grounds upon which criticism was based. What Hadidi and Majeed-Agha called *dakakeen thaqafiya* 'cultural grocers' (personal communications, 2018) were an injurious network of politically funded organisations serving extra-national political interests availing of outstanding access to means of symbolic production and distribution. And what Kawakibi dubbed 'Arabs of service' are a vocal minority of Arabs who are 'Islamophobic more than the Islamophobes themselves', 'serving the interests of [right wing parties] who appoint them to refute accusations of minority exclusion, or the interests of anti-Muslim programs which host them to prove a point about an intrinsic evil in this religion (Kawakibi, personal communication, 2018). And what Yazji called 'cultural superstars' were transient manifestations of a 'growing cultural populism' that encouraged trite reproductions of cultural prejudice and 'lazy reinforcements of facile cultural entertainment with an orientalist streak' (personal communication, December 1, 2017).

The idea of laziness or expediency '*istishal*' was a recurrent theme in critiquing the work of exiled intellectuals and artists. It referred to a tendency to produce work that is appealing to the current wave of funders' interests rather than undertaking the hard labour of creating artistically and intellectually original work that transcends them. Sometimes it was attributed to a 'loss of meaning' that resulted in a fixation on 'the main event... As if this revolution was the only thing that ever was.' (Majeed-Agha, personal communication, 2018). Other times it was perceived as a weak ethical stance towards oneself or towards the cause justified as a necessary compromise: 'They just want to get funding. I am one of them! I had to perform in a play about the situation in Syria. There are certain steps that you cannot skip' (Ibid).

Competing in the symbolic: the competitive performance of radicalism

Via Bourdieu, Thomas Medvetz emphasises that while all social action is self-interested in that it is geared to the benefit of its agent, not all action is oriented to 'the ordinary objects of interest—money, honours, etc.' (2018, p. 461). In certain fields or institutional settings, Medvetz explains, the pursuit of such interests is either extraneous or incompatible with the activity in question. Such seemed to be the case for some participants, particularly in a generation of exilic intellectuals, forcibly displaced at an age when they no longer hoped or aspired to start new careers nor had the time or the will to reinvent themselves. Instead, they replaced competition in the material domain with particularly fierce defences and

propagation of their own forms of judgment and appreciation. For this group, power struggle shifted almost completely outside the material domain into a battle of narratives revealing a hierarchical ordering of symbolic capital in competitive performances of leftist ethicality and/or victimhood. Here ethicality becomes a measure of symbolic stratification in a competitive display of dissent, radicalism, moral superiority, political persecution, or victimhood. The contest over symbolic capital attained through sacrifices for the movement - or what I will refer to drawing on Bourdieu's field theory as persecution capital- ossified antagonistic divisions within the intellectual opposition, which seemed as well-rehearsed and interpreted as they were difficult to resist.

Discursive fragmentation within the exilic field sometimes took the form of what participants construed as 'leftist outbidding' *muzayada yasarya*. This outbidding can be described as a specific type of anti-positioning, a performative self-positioning through an antagonistic display of left-wing political values and ideals. This mode of interaction aims to position the speaker 'always to the left side of their interlocutor' (Kawakibi, personal communication, 2018) in the sense of being more radical in their verbal support for social equality and their opposition to all forms of hierarchy. Two facets of this phenomenon made it problematic to participants. Firstly, it was seen as hypocritical in that it was often used as a superficial marker of identity and a boundary-making tool rather than a reflection of an experiential and lived ethicopolitical position. Secondly, and relatedly, that it had a compensatory function whereby the less praxis-based the position and the lower its holder's persecution capital, the louder the claims of radicality.

Kawakibi described this competitive performance of radicalism as 'an essential phenomenon within the field'. Revealing a wilfully performative streak, he says, 'when you confront them with numbers and facts, they will tell you "'even if it were true, you shouldn't say it"'. Such sanctimonious hypocrisy, he suggests, has been an obstacle against making progress politically: 'without self-critique, we can't move forward', he objected. (Ibid)

Yassin al-Haj Saleh suggested that outbidding is most salient among members of the more protected social groups who felt guilty about their relative privilege. They overcompensated for this guilt by outperforming others in radical talk. He uses this phenomenon to delegitimise his critics in academia, but in doing so, he also offers fascinating insights into its potential psychological motivations.

My explanation is this: as academics in primarily Western institutions... they are separated from human suffering. Generally, as individuals, they have lived comfortable middle-class lives, were educated in good Western universities, speak one or two foreign languages at least, they haven't faced real problems, and of course, they have a sense of guilt towards a war-torn country like Syria. That guilt is managed through a certain leftist outbidding *muzayada yasariya*... An article by me or a statement by Michel Kilo is rendered as dangerous as the [regime's] offensive on Ghouta today-- I mean, a complete lack of political sensitivity or nuance. (Personal communication, February 21, 2018)

'Leftist outbidding' and its critique reflect the identitarian nature of a symbolic power struggle in which a perceived moral high ground replaces material success or institutional status in the competition for recognition and distinction. Political persecution is used in a process of symbolic stratification in which incarceration is a most potent signifier.

Imprisonment history becomes a major source of what I will refer to as persecution capital and which is used in mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that delegitimise people on the margins of this new category of power (those with a sparse history of political persecution) and by extension, contributes to their relegation in the movement's social and political hierarchies as implied by Salam Kawakibi's objection to this power dynamic:

Competing on time spent in political imprisonment created a kind of legitimisation by incarceration, which is a dangerous source of power. As a political scientist, when I offer an opinion, I am confronted with questions about where I was when they were locked up in Assad's dungeons or when they were working on the Damascus Declaration. (Kawakibi, personal communication April 25, 2018)

The underlying assumption is that survivors of state violence and persecution ought to have more symbolic power, on account of their persecution capital, in the current formations of the oppositional assemblage.<sup>76</sup> Those who did not have such a history were marred with an implicit air of complicity, sometimes construed as a *sense of guilt*, as cited earlier in this chapter.

Incidentally, guilt was present at both ends of the passive/active spectrum of dissidence and is seen as the underlying emotion behind the motives of not only intellectuals who were seen to have done too little to challenge tyranny but also those who think they had done too much. Because there is an understanding that while intellectuals didn't create the revolution, they certainly paved the way for it and incited it (Al-Azm, 2013; Ghalioun, 2017d; Mardam-Bey, 2015), the failings of the revolution and the great suffering that came with it resulted in blame:

there is an underlying implication of guilt; that exiled intellectuals provoked the people and then ran away ... you have this idea that cannot be overcome; that these people [intellectuals] ... had involved others in bloodshed and then fled. They may not have done the killing themselves, but they are implicated in it because they mobilised people. (Mohammad Abu Laban interview, 2018)

Liwa Yazji similarly 'question[s] whether we should have confronted this regime knowing what we know now: that it is stronger than we could ever be and that those of us who took to the streets and mobilised people ended up fleeing and abandoning the people on the streets'. Later in the same interview, she questions whether intellectuals did, in fact, contribute to the struggle through their intellect or 'did they call for war from the safety of their exiles?' (2017)

Another manifestation of the competitive performance of ethicality, also potentially rooted in compassion and guilt, was unconditional, uncritical solidarity with the 'revolutionary

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<sup>76</sup> Paradoxically, with persecution capital as the main marker of legitimacy in this leftist outbidding, it was no surprise that Islamist parties (particularly the Muslim Brotherhood with their long history of political persecution and notoriously brutal imprisonment and torture experiences) were able to quickly dominate oppositionist institutions and organisational structures<sup>76</sup>; a development which according to many (see for example [Al Hammadi, 2017](#); [Al Bikir, 2017](#); [Muflih, 2017](#)) was detrimental to the revolution.



masses' as icons of courage and resilience (for more on compassion and guilt as emotional responses that have been studied for their possible links to marginalised group support, see Karaçanta, 2006). The absence of any critical element in this form of solidarity bred a surge of populism in which a divinisation of 'the people' was combined with an anti-intellectualism of a reactive nature. This contributed, as we have seen, to murky positions on growing Islamisation at times posited (despite participants' secularist progressivist positions) as an organic development of the movement or a reflection of the people's will, and at others dismissed as a result of foreign intervention, a temporary derailment or a politically motivated façade. In either case, it was neither rigorously examined nor contested but tolerated and sometimes even celebrated. This will be investigated more closely in Chapter Four.

In the opening of this section, I mentioned that the symbolic power struggle was most prevalent in the middle generation of exilic intellectuals. However, younger intellectuals and artists, particularly in Berlin, displayed a hierarchisation of their own in the performance of radicalism. Here it was more behavioural than ideological and observable more in the domain of lifestyle choices than ethicopolitical positioning. It seemed to inform a type of individualism or youth identity rather than substantive intellectual or political ideas. Influenced by Berlin's 'alternative scene' and sometimes aligned with a broader young migrant milieu, many newcomer Syrian artists were immediately drawn to this urban underground identity 'headquartered' in the Kreuzberg district of Berlin known for its radical counterculture. Participants in this category were keen to assert, often explicitly, a radical identity around which they formed exclusionary groups. This radical identity is closely connected with a rejection of integration to host societies which will be the focus of Chapter Three. The following fieldnotes excerpt taken from an interaction with a young Syrian refugee who was excluded from that circle illustrate this.

K and I had a conversation on difficulties in becoming part of a social group as a refugee in Berlin. She offered some anecdotes on how she explored circles of Syrian intelligentsia as potential friendship groups but was repelled by the prerequisite of performing a certain "Berlin-specific type of radicalism" for membership in such groups. This entailed what she described as a trite repertoire of statements and life choices, including which neighbourhood to rent in or what coffee shops (not) to frequent. This conversation brought to my attention the insistence of my interviewee last night on meeting in a specific underground establishment in Kreuzberg yesterday. As I avoided that choice for safety and convenience related reasons, my interviewee would repeatedly tell me of his 'intolerance for clean cafes', and we ended up meeting in his chosen dim-lighted smoke-dense anarcho-communist bar/communal space. When I told this story to K, s/he laughed knowingly and told me how typical this sounded of that social circle. Other markers of this identity include a largely nocturnal lifestyle, chain-smoking, drug use, rejection of learning German, resisting incorporation into the German legal system (registering a correct residence address, obtaining formal documentation etc.) and other ways of denouncing co-optation by the system for example through full-time employment or living in gentrified areas of the city. (Field notes, February 12, 2018)

A somewhat similar - although less pronounced - tendency was observable in Paris. The identitarian element is noticeably weaker, perhaps because Berlin's underground scene, as one participant observed (Hijazi, personal communication, 2018), is conducive to this kind of

alternative identity, but similarities are evident. Kawakibi, in his interview, sketches the Parisian version of the Syrian performance of radicalism thus:

There are youths of the revolution in Paris who are unfortunately spending their time doing drugs, drinking and using their revolutionary stories to pick up girls. Of course, I am sketching a caricature. But many have done such things, and they cause a lot of damage to the reputation of Syrians here. They are here because we helped them get scholarships ... but they don't want to pursue their studies. They just theorise, attitudinise and criticise.

In both cases, one can observe, building on Goffman, that this performance of radicalism involves a staging of the backstage self for an audience. This (non)-performance seems to be connected to the idea of authenticity, but perhaps it also aims to reflect a rejection of notions such as propriety and decorum in a context where such qualities are perceived as belonging to a hegemon other.

Conflict between symbolic and material domains of competition

If intellectual self-positioning was influenced by material as well as symbolic interests, rivalries and forms of power, the relationship between the two adds another layer of complexity. Where there was a conflict between symbolic and material interests, various manifestations of moral judgement – or the pains of cognitive dissonance – came to the surface. Sometimes these were directly alluded to in interviews; other times, they were reflected in participants' written grievances. I will explain.

Independence from the influence of funding was the normalised aspiration within the field where the ideal of Mannheim's free-floating intellectual 'not easily co-opted by governments or corporations' (Said, 1996 [1993]) seemed very much alive. But few were afforded the luxury of such independence, and where it was lacking, interventions were questioned, and co-optation was often hastily assumed. Liwaa Yazji told me she was

trying to fight to stay without any affiliation for as long as possible, to be able to produce independently or find a source of funding that is not part of this rivalry. It's very difficult. Each fund has a certain agenda and political direction. There might be some independent ones, but I'm not sure. (Yazji, personal communication, 2018)

Yazji received a grant for one of her films from the Heinrich Böll Foundation affiliated with the Green Party in Germany. And while she felt they did not interfere in the content of her work, she was concerned that there were organisations that would. She says,

I remember someone was asked by their funding organisation to add interviews with an Alawite person as well as a hijabi woman in their film. I remember pausing. Regardless of the purpose of this intervention ... I find it problematic. I think the experience of people working in Gaziantep exemplifies such manipulation by funders, especially considering the direct involvement of some organisations there in the process of militarisation. They had so much funding, but it was conditional. The Lebanese experience was also similar, though on a smaller scale.

What Yazji is referring to here is a network of NGOs whose funding is assumed to be entangled with the geopolitical interests of Turkey or Qatar who have played a significant role in the Syrian War. This entanglement, Yazji implies, compromises the autonomy of the

creative act and allows for the deployment of artists' and, writers' endeavours in achieving extranational political or cultural agendas.

Similarly, her partner Syrian-Palestinian poet and screenwriter Mohammad Abou-Laban claims that absolute independence is 'impossible.' He believes that, particularly in writing, the orientation of the publisher influences the content in multiple and often subtle or even subliminal ways.

When you write in a media organisation that belongs to Azmi Bishara, you are an Arab nationalist. This is clear. You don't necessarily have to address the issue of Arab nationalism in everything you write, but if it should come up, you have to reflect the right position... You cannot, for example, address Qatar's role in the war in Syria. You cannot raise these kinds of questions. These are limitations. Because while you may be able to avoid such issues, at any moment that the topic may arise, you are expected to [adopt their narrative], and you know that this is a precondition. (Personal communication, December 1, 2017)

Abou-Laban likens the impact of such dynamics to the impact of censorship in that 'it formats ideas' and 'ushers writers in a certain direction' (Ibid). For Abou-Laban, the influence of the political aspects of funders' editorial policies on intellectuals' narratives was not restricted to regional funding with clear political agendas. It also manifested in Western NGO funding, which 'had a substantial impact' in shaping the narratives of young exiled intellectuals.

As funding sources, they have requirements, perhaps related to emphasising the importance of civil society, equality, gender issues, etc. This naturally created trends, i.e. a discourse with prerequisites ...they won't give you funding unless you address these issues. They have guidelines. You look at what they are interested in, and if you want their funding, you produce your project accordingly. (Ibid)

And while these topics may be of interest to participants, it was the principle that was primarily problematised and only secondarily were possible practical consequences cited such as diverting focus from other important topics which may be more relevant, pertinent, urgent or central to the local context and its priorities.

Some intellectuals seem to accept the connection between intellectual output and means of production as a historical reality of cultural work. But others were troubled by it or denied it completely. For example, Mohammad Abou-Laban normalises the phenomenon when he says, 'Anyone who produces cultural work knows what the contextual conditions are and adjusts accordingly. One must be professionally pragmatic. You can't be dogmatic.' Conversely, Dara Abdulla not only refutes the impact funding might have on his discourse but is indignant about insinuations of his involvement in any such concessions. He writes in an online article:

Those who link my political and ethical positions to my place of employment are cruel and immoral. They imply that the political work I produce is connected to and constrained by the paradigms of my workplace. My positions, as reflected in my published work, remain unchanged since before joining any media organisation, and those who have followed my work know this well. As for those who claim that I deny my "Kurdish origins" to achieve certain political gains, ...theirs is an ignoble offence I will not forgive. The sacred-rhetoric-leftist-party 'axis of resistance' used to accuse anyone who

writes a letter in a Gulf paper of being an “oil writer” or a “child of Al Saud”, and this is indeed a *mumanaa* mentality [a pro-Assad current rooted in an anti-imperialist discourse] not to mention a hurtful accusation to a young writer trying to engage in public affairs. (Abdulla, 2017a)

It was also clear to participants that young intellectuals still struggling to build symbolic capital were more susceptible to the influence of funding than established ones. ‘Someone like Yassin al Haj Saleh will always find platforms from which to publish no matter what he writes.’ (Abou-Laban, personal communication, 2017). While writers and artists who avoid becoming part of any clusters of funding or politico-identitarian belonging will end up living on the interstices, ‘they become the margin’ (Ibid).

If I have suggested that competing over material resources has been as powerful as competition in the socio-symbolic domain in influencing intellectual positioning and shaping interfiled dynamics, the ways in which social actors reconcile these influences remains a question of potential future research interest. What is already clear for the purpose of this study is that conflicting symbolic and material interests and the ways in which they have interacted to influence the narratives of intellectual interventions, and the positionings of their authors have contributed to interfiled antagonisms and fed discursive atomisation.

## Discussion

This chapter has argued that intellectual positioning was influenced by structural factors like work and funding opportunities, particularly for a younger generation of exiles who sought to start new lives and careers after exile. But it was also strongly influenced by competition over symbolic status built around field-specific discursive power structures such as an individual’s sacrifices for the movement. In addition to these material and symbolic structures, positioning was influenced by politically rooted personal traumas inflicted upon participants during and before the war and by the narrative identities such experiences produced<sup>77</sup>. Underlying the tensions between material structural factors, field-specific symbolic and discursive power structures, and narrative identity, were difficult processes of reconciliation. A pragmatic self, driven by survival and financial security, sometimes had to negotiate with both a social self, seeking respect and status through better alignment with the movement’s cognitive praxis and through the increase of symbolic capital afforded by sacrifices made for it, as well as with a traumatised self, discursively seeking justice or reprisal. In other words, where they conflicted, narratives which aligned with material interests were negotiated with narratives which arise from the symbolic power structures and discursive expectations of the milieu and, of course, with those which arise from personal trauma - the latter being of a psychological nature beyond the sociological scope of this study. Naturally, such negotiations would occur independently of the knowledge production act and are sometimes consciously or unconsciously settled or reduced well before it begins - often through a self-narrative of ‘reactive agency’ (see Bruner, 1994, pp.

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<sup>77</sup> E.g. incarceration, torture, forced disappearance, threats, humiliating interactions or other forms of persecution.

44-45). Understanding the mechanisms of reconciliation that underlie these negotiations is an area of potential research interest for social psychology.

The multiple material, symbolic and psychological drivers for intellectual positioning contributed to the formation of a fragmented field constituting a number of mutually antagonistic intellectual collectives. Evaluating this oft-criticised division in light of scholarship on social movements and the sociology of intellectuals suggests that it is hardly unique. Factionalism and internal schisms are well-rehearsed in social movement literature, and while they used to be considered a result of poor internal conflict management (Gamson 1975; Miller 1983; Zald & Ash 1966 all cited in Balser, 1997), there has been increasing focus since the 1990s on external factors, such as government response to protest (Balser, 1997). Inter-group antagonisms are also well-rehearsed in the literature on the sociology of intellectuals (e.g. Eyerman, 1994; Baert, 2015), and the intellectual field has long been understood as a highly competitive and antagonistic one. Eyerman (1994, p. 97) suggests that 'Intellectuals exist only in relation to each other, as they compete'. Similarly, Baert argues that 'if there is one defining characteristic of the existence of intellectuals, it is their immersion in power struggles' (Baert & Susen, 2017, pp. 22-23). This is even more salient in a traumatised milieu as the very work of cultural trauma construction is 'inherently competitive' (Ushiyama & Baert, 2016, p. 473), always based on a struggle between various forces, each seeking to ensure that their own trauma narrative is 'legitimate and lasting' particularly in terms of determining who the victims and perpetrators are. Indeed, intellectuals' performance of trauma is intrinsically combative, and movement framings are almost always disputed, making rifts and divisions characteristic of social movements (e.g. see Eyerman & Jamison, 1991). According to Hutchinson (2016, p. 36), experiences of trauma are often performed in ways that aim to delineate boundaries within the political community. Tarrow (2011, p. 208) suggests that the growth in popular participation in the upward phase of a cycle of contention invites organisational proliferation whereby emerging organisations inevitably compete with each other and with 'early risers' often, we are told, over the use of violence. Tarrow had also argued as early as 1994 (p. 134) that external support for social movements makes it particularly 'tempting for local leaders to ignore relations with constituencies, leaving the door open to defection and fragmentation'. Baert & Booth (2012, p. 14) show that with an increasingly fragmented public sphere, intellectuals can only hope for prominence *within* one or some of these fragmentary collectives. Furthermore, Baert (2015, p. 178) suggests that intellectuals and artists draw on dramaturgical devices like genre conformity or rhetorical moves in order to create teams or collaborative collectives, small closely connected groups around which they position themselves. Members in such circles, we are told, are 'united by a shared set of ideas, principles, and practices' and are often antagonistic towards other groups in an elaborate performance of intergroup boundary work.

In addition to explanations stemming from participants' own self-reflection and the aforementioned explanations from social movement theory, positioning theory and cultural sociology, the combativeness of small collectives may also be attributable to socio-psychological dimensions of public sphere participation. With Bauman, Townsley (2012, pp. 300- 301) alludes to an element of pleasure in any moral dialogue; the enjoyment of the other(s)' company and of what they have to say. In the absence of such pleasure, we are

told, we end up investing our energy trying to disqualify adversaries from participating in the dialogue or trying to ignore them. Townsley suggests that people interact with the public sphere not out of duty or a will to power, but emotionally and affectively in order to 'enjoy the feelings of social solidarity such engagement can produce'. Furthermore, following Townsley (p.299), 'groupmaking practices', are intellectualising practices given that 'those who engage in group-making practices are typically intellectuals of some kind' that is they are 'agents who specialise in those practices of representation that divide group members from non-members'. This is testified to by the observation, following Drezner (2017, p. 58), that rising levels of partisanship expanded the overall demand for intellectuals as each ideological political cluster sought its own intellectuals. But it also resulted in the relegation of centralist or nuanced intellectuals because people in partisan clusters were far more likely to trust someone with whom they shared ideological affinity than someone with more heterodox views. It is in this way that social polarisation promoted ideologically homogenous intellectuals and ideological homogeneity intensifies divisions.

Furthermore, and within the sociopsychological vein of explanations, one might observe that a conflation between the private and the public realms contributed to an overidentification with one's political positioning, which enflamed polemics and strengthened their identitarian dimension. Intellectuals sought in their small collectives safe spaces of discursive homogeneity, building group identity and establishing group boundaries through exclusionary interactions with other groups. Thus, intragroup solidarity fed intergroup competition and hierarchisation in competitive performances of ethicality.

What this brief review of theoretical literature on intellectuals and fragmentation in social movements aims to demonstrate is that divisions, rifts, identitarian boundaries and many other traits of the Syrian revolution are neither exceptional nor unprecedented and yet they were often presented through a discourse of exceptionalism and performed with a sense of self-flagellation bearing essentialist and culturalist undertones. Participants offered a variety of explanations in interviews for their divided condition, as we have seen. In March 2019, Burhan Ghalioun published a book (2019) titled '*Atab Al That* or 'Self Defect' subtitled 'Chronicles of an Unfinished Revolution: Syria 2011-2012'. The book focuses on the divisions which plagued Syria's dissident political and intellectual fields. It explains how this 'self-defect' has failed the people's uprising (Ghalioun, 2019). Like Ghalioun, a number of intellectuals attribute the 'defect' to structural sociohistorical factors, including the regime's own 'divide and rule' strategies. Some offered more culturally rooted explanations such as a limiting and myopic 'epistemic poverty' within the field (Kawakibi, personal communication, 2018) or psychosocial ones like the need for peer protection in an environment where an increased sense of vulnerability heightened the need for personal alliances. One of the most common explanations by participants, as we have seen, was that the sense of defeat produced self-blame or, as Haugbølle puts it with al-Haj Saleh: 'exile and defeat produce self-critique' (2015, p. 30). Normalising the phenomenon, a sign of its otherwise exceptionalist presentation, Farouk Mardam-Bey cited a text by Fredrich Ingles in a Facebook post (2019), reminding his followers that fragmentation and mutual blame have long been outcomes of a failed revolution. He starts his post with the imperative 'Listen! Beware!' and cites an Arabic translation of the following text:

After the failure of every revolution or counter-revolution, a feverish activity develops among the fugitives, who have escaped to foreign countries. The parties of different shades form groups, accuse each other of having driven the cart into the mud, charge one another with treason and every conceivable sin. [...] Of course, disappointment follows disappointment, and since this is not attributed to the inevitable historical conditions, which they refuse to understand, but rather to accidental mistakes of individuals, the mutual accusations multiply, and the whole business winds up with a grand row... Those fugitives, who have any sense and understanding, retire from the fruitless squabble as soon as they can do so with propriety and devote themselves to better things. (Engels, 1874)

The overemphasis of fragmentation in the Syrian exilic field has weakened its credibility in the eyes of domestic opposition, on-the-ground revolutionaries and the international community. It has also undermined and narrowed the scope of political organising in exile. While these and other negative impacts of fragmentation are examined in this study and elsewhere, I suggest that polemical internal divisions have also been a productive force in the establishment of the movement's 'cognitive praxis'. If the success of a social movement can be judged by such a practice (Eyerman & Jamison, 1991), then there still is hope for narrating the Syrian revolution optimistically. Indeed, approaching the conflictual nature of the field's fragmentation and ensuing debates as a positive and constitutive force is not unthinkable. Divisions, collective blame and intergroup hostilities among exiled intellectuals were not merely symptoms of the broader fragmentation of the movement and of Syrian society but also mechanisms of idea formation and articulation. These antagonistic interpersonal and intergroup dynamics may be understood as a 'working through' and an 'acting out' (Eyerman, 2012, p. 577) of the traumatic experiences of failed revolution and war. While they may not be conducive of effective political organising, and indeed were often blamed for the failure of the revolution, they are symptomatic of the revival of Syrian political and intellectual life, domestically and transnationally. It would clearly take time for any forward pushing reconciliatory process to reap concrete frame-bridging results. However, a remarkably recurrent reference to the need for 'reflexive discursive revisions' both in interviews (Ghalioun, 2017c), in written interventions (e.g. AlJundi, 2018; Ghalioun, 2019) and through dedicated online platforms (Noonpost, 2018), may indicate that such a process is already underway.

## Chapter Three

### From Double Conscience to Dual Gaze

This chapter examines how exiled Syrian intellectuals perceived and related with the societies to which they migrated and how this relationality contributed to their narratives and positionings. Additionally, the chapter seeks to understand the impact of their specific experience of exile upon the ways in which participants described, evaluated, integrated with or otherwise performed their relationality towards 'host societies'. I borrow the term 'host society' from migration studies for ease of reference with an awareness of the political problematic embedded within it and with the understanding that it is impossible to conceive of any such society as a whole, let alone relate to it monolithically. My intention rather is to capture thick descriptions of the very much polyphonic perceptions of and attitudes towards 'the West' as a conceptual construct and how the circumstances in which proximity to it was brought about have impacted upon an already complicated relationship with this discursive construct.

The chapter describes new asymmetries in which the intellectual finds herself valorising certain trauma narratives or storylines over others; a choice very much influenced by the need to reach new audiences in exile bringing to the surface new dilemmas surrounding authenticity- for example in understanding the relationship between the emergence of a universalising cosmopolitan narrative and between the internationalisation of their audience and cultural funding.

#### Tensions around cultural representation

After a period of euphoric emancipation from state authority which the experience of 2011 offered, becoming a refugee meant being again at the mercy of a state, though now in very different ways. This was particularly true in the first few uncertain months while asylum applications were being processed, and it was exacerbated by frequent bureaucratic complications. Shortly after her arrival in Germany, novelist Rosa Yaseen-Hassan describes the relationship between an exile and her country of refuge as 'defined by an intensifying feeling of powerlessness' (Yaseen-Hassan cited in (Snaije, 2014). For intellectuals, the culturally specific and linguistically bound field upon which their identity and livelihood depended meant that the language barrier kept them at the margins of their new societies often 'retreat[ing] to silence' as they 'try to understand [their] position in the new exile' as Mohammad Attar<sup>78</sup> laments in an Arabic language article published in July 2015, the month

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<sup>78</sup> Mohammad Al Attar is a playwright. He is a participant in this study. Born in Damascus in 1980, he completed a degree in English literature at Damascus University, followed by a degree in Theatrical Studies from the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts. He then completed an MA degree in Applied Theatre at London's Goldsmiths University. Today, he is considered an important chronicler of war-torn Syria. His plays were staged at various international festivals and venues around the world. For most of his plays, he joined forces with the Syrian director Omar Abusaada. They completed a theatrical trilogy adapting Greek tragedies dedicated to the



of his arrival in Berlin (Al Attar, 2015). 'Language too is exile', Attar declares. 'I don't know when I will learn German', he adds, 'Arabic is a homeland. I write in no other language, and I don't like to think in any other'. At the time of the study, only 11 of 39 participants were formally employed<sup>79</sup>.

Combined with the echo of traumatic immersion in a revolutionary movement and the need to project that collective trauma into the wider world (see also Alexander, 2017, p. 111), a return to the Syrian cause, now from a geographical distance, would counter such powerlessness and marginalisation. After initial silent periods of varying lengths, the vast majority resumed their intellectual activity, engaging themes connected with the events taking place in Syria, though now often approached through an increasingly universalistic lens. Instead of writing about 'Injuries by Chemical Weapons in Eastern Ghuta' for example (al-Haj Saleh, 2013), an intellectual might now be writing about 'Terror, Genocide, and the "Genocratic" turn' in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (al-Haj Saleh, 2019b); of course with a focus on Syria.

#### Representation, universalisation and the new audience

For the previously locally focused, this universalising turn shifted the register of trauma work from local specifics to universalist abstractions. Like exiled Palestinian intellectuals before them (see Halabi, 2017, pp.8-9), these intellectuals saw their universalising project as involvement in a 'poetics of the absolute' that reads their national trauma in light of a universal narrative of oppression, massacre and displacement while particularising the humanist discourse of emancipation by inscribing it within the cultural and political specificities of the Syrian event. For the already cosmopolitan, it was merely a stylistic adaptation that aligned more directly with the themes of interest and worldviews of the new audiences as expressed in funders' calls for proposals or revealed through the market dynamics of a burgeoning Syrian 'culture industry' in exile.

The turn away from Syria's political specifics may have been partly the outcome of a political impasse that rendered political analyses impossibly thorny. But it also meant, from a positionist perspective, that intellectual interventions became more relevant to a multinational audience, achieving trauma work's objective of engaging an international audience (Alexander, 2017, p.111), all the while becoming more amenable to European

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lives of women seeking refuge from war. Following the adaptation of *Trojan Women* (2013) in Jordan and *Antigone of Shatila* (2014) in Lebanon, *Iphigenia* was staged at Volksbühne in Berlin in September 2017. His most recent play, *Damascus 2045*, has opened the 2019 /2020 season for Theater Powzechny in Warsaw. Besides his writings for stage, Al Attar has written for numerous magazines and newspapers, with a special focus on the Syrian Uprising. He is a participant in this study.

<sup>79</sup> Five of those formally employed were employed by academic institutions, two by medical institutions, three working in theatre and one in publishing. The rest include three participants who were already retired before 2011 and fourteen independent artists, writers and filmmakers dependent on grants and other project-based funding. One participant in this last group, a very famous writer, described to me that there were times when she had to do casual work, like babysitting, to pay rent. Participants whom I met at their homes lived in very small rented apartments on the outskirts of the city. One lived in a room provided by the research institution they worked with.

NGO funding. This change in register influenced both content and style. As Hussein Chawich put it: 'only central meanings could be produced in the centre' (personal communication, 2018). Central meanings can be understood in this context as the ability to see and represent the local/peripheral from an external/metropolitan perspective.

This external perspective, or the ability to see the collective self from a distance, was much more celebrated than problematised. As filmmaker Meyar Roumi explained, for example, 'oscillating between distance from my subject [Syria] and proximity to it has been beautiful; it has been invigorating' (Personal communication, 2018). Literary critic and political writer Sobhi Hadidi credited exilic distance for his ability to recognise his own prior limitations vis-à-vis notions like pluralism and democracy and their application at the level of personal and political life (Personal communication, 2018). This view of distance as intellectually empowering draws clear parallels with Palestinian and Iraqi intellectuals in exile who construed their state of liminality between two cultures as 'an advantage that reinforces their critical sensibilities' (Jabra as cited in Halabi, 2017, p.101), enabling a plurality of vision and a layered awareness that hones their critical and creative power (Said cited in Halabi, 2017, p.101).

Reference to 'distance' and 'critical distance' in describing a newfound ability to see home society through a new, purportedly more truthful lens was recurrent in interviews. Mohammad Al Attar says, 'Geographical distance inevitably affords critical distance'. He continues to describe how such distance has helped him 'discover other sides to the Syrian dilemma' approaching it through 'personal narratives' and addressing 'the colossal political and economic transformations taking place' by telling real people's stories (Personal communication, 2018). Relatedly, being in the West enabled Mohammad Abou Laban to reread his own work, imbuing it with an increasingly political understanding. He says, '[migration] gave me the critical distance to recognise how my work had been interacting with the Syrian event' (Personal communication, 2018).

But the notion of 'critical distance' is not as analogous with objectivity as its use often suggests. Distance is always in relation to some position elsewhere. In that sense, celebrating distance can be seen as a valorisation of a new position and its corresponding perspective, in this case, a western centric perspective. In the aforementioned examples, reference to 'critical distance' can then be seen as symptomatic of a Du Boisian Double-Consciousness, the ability to see Syria through a gaze influenced by the intrigues and aesthetics of a European culture industry. In the previous examples, Attar's shift towards personal testimonies of war and exile and Abou Laban's increasingly politicised reading of his own work, both construed as the result of exile, also increase these interventions' relevance and appeal to a Western audience.

Valorising the external gaze inwards as 'critical distance' sheds a positive light on exiled intellectuals' growing role in performing the Syrian trauma and identity to a Western audience; a natural consequence of exile and the broadening of audience it brought, and an essential component of intellectuals' well-rehearsed role in constructing the Syrian cultural trauma and changing collective identity (see Eyerman, 1994). Thus 'critical distance' was essentially a reflection of the experience of exiled intellectuals who inevitably came to view

their collective national identity *from the outside* and represent it with a new discursive field in mind.

#### Internalised Orientalism and market demands

But not all Westward-directed representations of Syria adopted a Western-influenced hermeneutic. One can speak of two distinct approaches to cultural representation: one which emphasised difference and which attracted a general audience and as such interacted with market dynamics; and another which inferred similarity, which generally addressed a cultural audience and as such interacted with NGO funding dynamics. In theoretical terms, one might say that the emphasis on difference constitutes a reductionism which Said (1978) diagnosed as the instigator of Orientalism. The emphasis on similarity, on the other hand, can be attributed to the universalistic tendencies of intellectuals (see, for example, Benda, 1927 [1928]; Shils, 1958 [1972]). As such, I will refer to the first approach as Orientalist and the second as Cosmopolitanist. In this section, I will focus on the former.

Representations that emphasised difference were ‘especially rewarded’ by a general audience in the host societies (Azimi, 2016, p. 339) and if the study of an author’s positioning must be accompanied by a hermeneutic understanding of the experiences, concerns, and hopes of their audiences within their specific socio-political context (Baert, 2015, p. 181), then the tendency towards self-orientalising<sup>80</sup> can be explained by this new audience’s interest in the newcomers’ difference. Interest in the newcomers’ difference may here be attributed to a desire to lighten the burden of empathy vis-à-vis Syria and Syrians by othering the object of suffering as distant and dissimilar to the extent of incomprehensibility, i.e. ultimately irrelevant. One might recall here that ‘strong identifications are only produced when distant events have a local resonance’ (Levy & Sznajder, 2002, p. 92). Indeed, the desire to emphasise difference and minimise identification with the victims is reflected in the acclaim received by a film like Oscar-nominated *Of Fathers and Sons* (2019) which takes a close look at fighters in an Islamic faction in a remote area of rural Syria. It is also reflected in the fact that, as Paris-based cultural worker Jumana Al-Yasiri noted in our interview, Cesar’s extensive collection of photos of death by torture in government custody leaked from inside Assad’s prisons and depicting 6,786 carcasses of torture-victims instigated no cultural representations, art, film or human stories to counter the dehumanising impact of the photos with the exception of an obscure 15 minute documentary by Human Rights Watch (2014).

There is a pathological insistence [on the innocence of the regime]. Cesar’s photos did nothing! Too little! I have followed post-holocaust narrations of trauma and have seen how it works, but in the case of Syria, it is moving no one. There is no empathy; because of the Islamist boogeymen. People are not connecting with the image of a hijabi woman mourning her children.

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<sup>80</sup> The term Orientalism has become a generic attribute used to dismiss various ways of describing the orient. I use the term somewhat reluctantly to indicate two phenomena: (a) emphasis on and exaggeration of cultural difference (b) negative depictions of oriental peoples reminiscent of colonialist or racist discourse.

Representation is failing partly because of Islamophobia. (Jumana Al-Yasiri, personal communication, 2018)

Islamophobia in this context can be seen as an Orientalist emphasis on difference.

Perhaps by virtue of their positioning as *intellectuals* and given the cosmopolitanist and secularist leanings that generally accompany this social category, the self-orientalising approach in representing Syria was not prevalent among participants in this particular study who not only opted for a more cosmopolitan tone in their work but were also highly critical of self-Orientalising narratives. Sorbonne academic, public intellectual and the first president of the oppositional Syrian National Council Burhan Ghalioun attributes Orientalism to a form of 'intellectual lethargy' by which it is easier to internalise the common view of the Syrian people as a conservative Muslim population rather than as 'diverse groups, individuals, classes, demands and aspirations'. He attributes this attitude to lack of critical thinking towards colonial narratives resulting in the absorption of what is commonly accepted in the West, 'without analysing it in the context of hegemony and the international struggle in which Western societies operate' (Personal communication, 2018). Some (e.g. Azmeh, personal communication, 2018) placed the critique of internalised Orientalism at the centre of the revolution's cognitive praxis, referencing a fervid social media campaign against the cultural arrogance of anti-uprising poet Adonis<sup>81</sup> as a symptom of the movement's overwhelming rejection of 'contempt for the people'. Others, like Sobhi Hadidi, held that orientalist prejudice explains not only incredulity towards the Syrian revolution among some Arab intellectuals but also the sceptical position of the global left.

It's ridiculous because it comes from people who have always criticised Orientalism. Take the position of Tariq Ali, a life-long leftist activist and a Trotskyite. When the Nusra was born, he immediately came out and said Bashar Assad's regime is secularist and denied that the chemical attack on Ghouta was committed by his regime. This is plain Orientalism. (Personal communication, 2018)

The implication here is that rather than explaining the Islamisation of the movement by structural or geopolitical factors, these leftist intellectuals hastened to an Orientalist imaginary all too quickly explaining Islamisation by purely cultural factors and consequently siding with the dictatorship. Alternatively, well-aware of the structural factors underlying the rise of Islamic factions within the movement, these leftist intellectuals' strategically denied Assad's atrocities out of their fear or rejection of the religious alternative.

While some observed a strong anti- Orientalist discourse within the movement's cognitive praxis and attributed counter-revolutionary positions to its influence, others complained about the popularity of Orientalist representations that reinforced stereotypes of Arab culture. This concern was supported by the academic literature (see Azimi, 2016, p. 339), which shows that such works were very well-received. The popularity of orientalist representations was also reflected in the nature of works being selected for translation. An

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<sup>81</sup> Adonis is a celebrity poet and intellectual who sided with the regime, having long been a fierce critic of contemporary Arab culture and society.

overview of these works suggested a 'complacency on the part of publishers and cultural mediators in dealing with the Arab personality and culture' (Abou-Laban, personal communication, 2017), resulting in the reinforcement of familiar stereotypes.

Take, for example, Abboud Said. He represents the stereotypical Arab in the European imaginary; in terms of dealing with women, the desire for Europe, the other's language etc. Analysing the literary material shows that Abboud Said's writing is monophonic; he treats topics in a very limited way, there is no problematic question, nor a literary one nor philosophical. This is what differentiates good work from poor work, the commercial from the literary. This is what distinguishes diligent work that can go beyond mere representation of 'Syrian art'. By examining the kind of material being translated, one can understand this issue. It's not a matter of conspiracy; it's a question of complacency. This is what I know about the other, and therefore this is what draws me to them. It is a reproduction of Orientalism. The prototype was created here [in the West], then adopted there [in the East] and reproduced [by exilic writers] only to be readopted again in the West. Another layer has been added to the notion of Orientalism with the refugee crisis, its re-reproduction. (Abou Laban, personal communication, 2017)

Upon their entry into an international market, Syrian writers and artists took on the role of representing Syria and its revolutionary movement but felt overpowered by a wave of Syrian art and writing, which became massively popular by feeding preconceptions about an exotic and radically different culture. 'They are representing a culture in a way that devalues and limits it' Abou Laban tells me of such writers (2017). Literary intellectuals feared exclusion from the international literary world as a result of the growing impression of mediocrity that Syrian authors were making in a Western market marked by popular interest in the tritest representation of their collective identity. They were eager to finally enter an international literary field but felt side-lined and misrepresented by sensationalist works with broad appeal.

We had been hidden. We were pathetic. Dictatorship had oppressed every fibre of our being. Except for those who migrated, no one was able to publish internationally. This is the time for us to reveal that which had been hidden... But the good is getting lost with the bad in this enormous cultural output; mediation networks can no longer distinguish good work from commercial work ... Even organisations with leftist leanings fall into the trap of capitalist preconceptions of the Arab world. The European left is sometimes even worse than the right in this respect; they have a completely Orientalist view. Exceptions are rare. This [self-essentialising] genre constitutes more than 70% of what is being published. It is attractive to the average German reader... They like to read material that flirts with their existing views rather than challenging them. If you present something that will raise questions, require the reader to make an effort or rethink previous convictions, only the intellectual elite would be interested in it. (Rosa Yaseen-Hassan, personal communication, 2018)

In their objection to the popular, Yassin-Hassan, Abu-Laban and Yazji reflect the dominance of the core of the intellectual field where 'popular' success leads to a form of devaluation, even

disqualification of its producer. (Bourdieu, 1990) and condemning it allows those at its centre to 'lay claim to a monopoly of legitimate competence which defines them as such and in reminding people of the frontier which separates professionals from the profane' (p.150).

An 'imposed' representational role

Trauma work necessarily involves a level of cultural representation which was not always readily embraced by exiled intellectuals – it was particularly problematic for visual artists and literary writers who seemed to be negotiating the demand for 'Syrian work' (as well as their own sense of duty towards the cause) on the one hand, with professional pride and a desire to be recognised as artists and writers in their own right on the other. It did not satisfy them to be recognised merely in their capacity as cultural representatives, or indeed representations, of the at the time hot topic of Syrian refugees. But at the same time, many continued to engage in their work with the political event taking grip of their home country as earlier discussed. For example, participants overwhelmingly expressed vigilance towards the instrumentalisation of Syrian art or 'refugee art' for the purpose of feeding idea-constructs that aim to put the chaos and multiplicity of the Syrian social reality into conveniently ordered and easy-to-grasp moulds. This manifested in statements about refusing to participate in events whose organisers had approached them as 'refugee writer', 'refugee artist' or 'Syrian artist'. Beyond reflecting an immigration status and a political stance against the regime in Damascus, 'what does [refugee writer] even mean?' Rosa Yaseen-Hassan asks. 'That I am a refugee first and a writer on the margin? My identity is not a refugee! I am a writer who fled. There is a big difference'. (Personal communication, 2018)

Similarly, Sulafa Hijazi observes 'an objectification of the Syrian artist' by which one is 'received as a refugee artist or as a *Syrian* artist more than any other artistic, research or human quality' (Personal communication, 2018). While she supports the idea of politically engaged art, she is concerned that for Syrians in exile, it has become 'imposed as an expectation' by cultural mediators. Politically engaged Syrian art in Europe started as a spontaneous expression of strong political views and emotions, she said. But her concern is that with time, it has become an expectation. This is largely because of the issue of funding, she added. As exilic intellectuals who were working for the periphery but enabled by funding from the metropolitan centre, a new form of intellectual dependency was forming by which reliance on European funding influenced the content of intellectual output in subtle and complex ways.

Intellectuals are adept at avoiding compliance with commercial market demands; their very recognition as intellectuals is premised on it. And yet, most study participants depended on precarious intellectual and artistic work for their livelihood, particularly after exile. Thus, where commercial considerations were defused, artist grants and NGO funding played the central role. In other words, the necessity of Orientalising for mass popularity was mitigated by what Kaelen Wilson-Goldie calls 'revolution grants' which rendered making a film, play, or art project about the Arab revolutions as rewarding as making art about AIDS in the 80s in the US (Azimi, 2016, p. 339). This meant that it was still possible for exiled writers and artists to live off of their intellectual labour without going down the popularising Orientalist route as long as their work engaged with Syria and was attuned to funders' artistic and hermeneutic sensibilities. In at least this way, the often demonised 'revolution

grants' enabled Syrian exiled artists and writers to avoid joining in the self-Orientalising performance of difference. But the grants presented other perceived challenges.

Hijazi contends that when NGO funding came in, it contributed to the creation of specific cultural policies conducive to 'speech art' and ideological discourses that limit the artist to a small circle of homogenous ideas. As a result, Syrian art had to adhere to a certain prototype in order to avail of funding. 'From the onset, the call for proposals seems directive. They expect me to abort the artistic research process, the natural exploratory unfolding of the creative act' and respond to a brief. Hijazi believes that this is something artists now realise in retrospect. For her, an element of regret seems present: 'Much of the work that I did, I now wonder why I did it.'

Of course, it is likely that participants are overstating the uniqueness of their predicament. The type of autonomy for which they seem to long is arguably not available to anyone in the neo-liberal economy. With the era of Mannheim's 'free-floating intellectual' and Plesu's 'non-profit intellectual'<sup>82</sup> bygone, European intellectuals too have to position themselves in a particular light to receive funding or to be published (see Baert, 2012; 2015). But this is a reality that the newcomers were just about to discover.

Even when they were sceptical of funding-imposed trends, participants seemed to continue to be influenced by them. For example, in our interview, Rosa Yaseen-Hassan told me that 'although the Syrian revolution lost its charm, the issue of refugees in Europe is still hot. The work of Syrians in Europe maintained interest to publishers and funders from that standpoint. This is a dangerous trap that many fell into.' Towards the end of our interview, when asked about what she was currently working on, Rosa told me that in her last novel, *Touched By Magic* (2016) which is set in 2011 and 2012, Damascus was her atonement for having fled and that she could now move on to other topics. Her next book was going to be a novel about a Syrian refugee.

Many participants were wary of the swift appropriation of 'good politics' in the service of what were considered to be dubious political agendas driven by personal interests. Significantly, mediators of the culture industry in host societies (e.g. curators, publishers, producers, or grant boards) were also wary of the instrumentalisation of politics in art (Azimi, 2016, p.345) even as they continued to encourage representational work in their calls for submission and other grant-related communications. Distancing themselves from the thorny process of navigating these terrains, a few participants wanted to remain as apolitical and anti-representational as possible. But so, subtle political or representational dimensions were present in their work, not only because they knew that 'to be apolitical

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<sup>82</sup> The non-profit intellectual 'does not delimit his vocation according to the priorities of the moment, he does not regulate his efforts under the pressure of fixed appointment schedules, and he does not formulate questions so that they guarantee generous sponsorship. Under the hallucinatory influence of pure speculation, freed from the obsession of being competitive and from the mechanical rhythm of academic promotion, this kind of researcher does not integrate easily into institutional life. He is his own institution. At worst, he loses himself in brilliant oratorical performances and runs the risk of becoming a picturesque failure. But if he succeeds, his success is that of free investigation, of the unconventional approach, of the unforeseen. (Plesu, 1995, p. 68)

risks flirting with philistinism' (Ibid, p. 343), but also because they were mindful that their work will only ever be perceived in light of its Syrian historical, cultural and political context, even if they did not intend it as such. Emphasising this reality, these 'apolitical' artists and writers seemed to be reassuring themselves (and/or me) during interviews that they haven't prematurely surrendered their national belonging or abandoned their tormented country. For example, Mohammad Omran<sup>83</sup> explained in our interview that he felt that he 'had the right to work on what is personal', as opposed to that which is political, before quickly asserting that 'Syria is always in the background for sure'. Looking to understand his shift from the engaged to the apolitical during 2014, he added, 'I think perhaps when I realised there would be no return [to Syria] and that Bissan [his partner] and I are establishing a new life for ourselves here [in France] and Mina [their daughter] was coming to the world, I started thinking that I wanted to distance myself from Syria and turn to a more personal focus.' The self-justifying undertone becomes clearer when he adds pensively and unprompted: 'I don't think it's selfish. I think I have the right to work on my personal project'. One might understand this undertone as a sign of a sense of *perceived* guilt, a sense that one needs to justify such a choice and to challenge the expectation that all Syrian artists are called upon to commit to a cultural representational or political role.

Indeed, doing trauma work or understanding one's work (even if subtly) as such may have functioned may have been a path to a more personal predicament; how to reconcile survivor guilt with survival instinct. Such guilt was exacerbated by the special treatment and attention that intellectuals and artists received from European countries, especially those with an established presence and influence in the Syrian cultural scene, notably, France through its once-popular Centre Culturel Français (CCF), and Germany through its equally lively Goethe-Institut. This is particularly true given that NGO funding for diasporic artists was often taken from discontinued funding to these institutions. Al-Yasiri (2015) suggests that it was part of a strategy to attract Syrian intellectuals shortly after the unrest began: 'European countries have often prioritised hosting Syrian artists and intellectuals while remaining aware of potential problems which arise from an increase of refugees escaping the constantly escalating violence of the Middle East.' She specifically mentions France, 'which began issuing visas to Syrian artists and cultural workers quite early, especially to those who were already entrenched in French communities in Syria.'

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<sup>83</sup> Mohamad Omran is a visual artist who uses sculpture, painting, and sometimes video art as means of expression. He is a participant in this study. Born in Damascus in 1979, he graduated from the Department of Sculpture at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Damascus University and began his career as a sculptor in the local art scene before leaving Syria to pursue a PhD in art history at the University of Lyon II. He is the recipient of several art awards and has held solo and group exhibitions around Europe and the Arab World. His work is part of numerous private and public collections, including the British Museum and the Atassi Foundation. He has been living in France since 2007. According to his website, 'the beginning of 2011 marks a turning point in his artistic career when his works on paper began to receive attention, allowing him to multiply individual and collective exhibitions'.



## **Cosmopolitanism and the international reframing of the movement**

Critiques of cosmopolitanism in the second half of the twentieth century 'have rendered the ideal of belonging to a harmonious global community of cosmopolitan citizens naive at best, at worst simply futile' (Braidotti, et al., 2013, p. 1). Post-colonial critiques further trace it to colonial interests. To invoke cosmopolitanism, then, is already to risk ambiguity or controversy. But the notion maintains its purchase in contemporary academic discourse and remains important to this study in as much as it invokes an imaginary of an ongoing process of building social connections that are rooted in real transnational relations rather than on an un-situated or abstract universalism (Moore, 2013). It is particularly relevant to the conversation on exiled intellectuals when understood as an ethicopolitical relational model of planetary interaction that embraces diversity and a belief in our deep-rooted and structural relationality as a species. (Braidotti, et al., 2013)

Thus, when I describe participants as cosmopolitanist, I am referring to an imaginary which, to use Braidotti's definition, adopts an 'affirmative response to the processes of planetary interrelation' (p.8).

In contrast with the 'localising' function of funding, participants viewed themselves, their work and their cultural background as internationally situated. Adopting the 'critical universalistic mode of public engagement and intervention' familiar to intellectuals (Eyal & Buchholz, 2010, p. 123), many rejected narratives that adopted a divided-world view; East vs West, Islam vs modernity etc. Yassin al-Haj Saleh, for example, responded to my question about the cultural referentiality of the movement's emancipatory framing and accusations of its Western-rooted modernist bias by saying:

We are part of this modern world. Like other countries, Syria was established as a country through a process of interaction with the world of modernity. These notions [emancipatory humanist values] are not alien to us. Not only at the level of ideas and their origins but even at the level of structures, we are living within a system of international structures and conditions - intellectually, politically and institutionally- with which it is not suitable to say this notion originated here and that idea belongs there; this is ours, and that is theirs. This approach is a violation of the intellect and a violation of the whole notion of genealogy or origin. It is also completely aligned with the interests of Western centrism as well as with the interests of Islamists who claim that these are foreign concepts, and of course, with the interests of the regime. It is a discourse that alienates the oppressed from the tools which allow them to reclaim politics (personal communication, 2018).

Participants, on the whole, viewed notions like civil society, human rights, freedoms and democracy as part of a universal discourse to which various epistemes have contributed at various stages of human history. 'It is not Western.' Ghalioun tells me aggravatedly when I allude to accusations of a Western genealogy for the values adopted by the civil current of the movement<sup>84</sup>. 'We are not living in a cocoon', he continues, 'those who say these values

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<sup>84</sup> I use the word 'civil' in this dissertation drawing on the notion of madani, which is central to the discursive field of the Arab Revolutions. Madani translates to civil but has contextually specific semantic layers with strong normative overtones and connotations of secularism, rule-of-law and a conception of 'social democracy' that is focused on 'social equality, solidarity and egalitarianism' (Tagma, et al., 2013, p. 386). The

have no referentiality in our culture and who frame the movement as Islamist or sectarian are either mentally challenged or enemies of the people.’ In effect, whenever I alluded to discourses that question the cultural authenticity of the emancipatory framing of the movement, I was met with a mixture of ardent rejection and astonishment.

Furthermore, the adoption of a strongly cosmopolitan lens manifested in the way participants, particularly those who have studied or lived abroad and engaged with other communities, focused on the connectedness of peoples’ struggles (e.g. Mohammad Attar’s play *Antigone*, which narrates Syrian women’s journeys of exile through Greek mythology). It also manifested in suggesting that ‘world powers’, including their host states, were implicated in Assad’s ‘war against the Syrian people’ and in presenting the Syrian war as a distinctly global affair. Al-Haj Saleh suggests, for example, that by protecting Assad, global powers ‘think that they are ensuring that Syria’s situation remains safe for them, but actually, the world is being Syrianised under their leadership.’ Asserting the global nature of struggle, he adds, ‘This world must change, its change being a matter of self-defence for billions of people.’ (al-Haj Saleh, 2017a). In this way, exiled Syrian intellectuals reframed their struggle from a local to a global scale assisted by ‘access to networks of activism in the West’ and ‘engaging Western supporters; academics, journalists, writers, artists’. That is, as they adapted to a Western context, they shifted from a local positionality and perspective to a global one, developing, in the process, a dual relationship with host societies that is antagonistic towards governments and their supporters and solidaristic towards the people and their defenders.

By presenting the Syrian war in light of a contemporary world order and the movement against dictatorship as part of a global plight for freedom, justice and social equality, participants were faithful to intellectuals’ inclination towards universality (Eyal & Buchholz, 2010). But they were also choosing a focus that was compatible with the expansion of their audience and funding, as well as their need to support the movement from their new position in the West by asserting its global relevance and repercussions. It is, however, important to note that even as they presented their trauma narrative in a universalistic lens, many emphasised a uniqueness of the Syrian trauma and often reflected a sense of exceptionalism vis-à-vis its tragic nature. This is encapsulated in the following excerpt from an online interview with Yassin al-Haj Saleh,

It is no longer acceptable for us Syrians to tell our story as if Syria was an isolated planet or island; you cannot speak of Assadist prisons, torture and death without speaking about how others have died and how they were imprisoned and tortured. We Syrians have a tendency to think that what happened to us is exceptional and has not happened to others. This isn’t true. It has happened to many; other peoples have experienced this and more. What is terrible about our story is that the killers are being reinstated with an international mood that ranges between indifference and enthusiasm. This did not happen after the Holocaust; the Nazis were defeated, and Nazism dismantled. It has not happened in Cambodia after the genocide by the Khmer Rouge (1975- 1979); their regime was brought down, and they were

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‘civil current’ refers to the constellation of oppositionist organisations, parties and individuals who adopt such a democratic, secularist, civil-society-based framework for the movement.

tried. It did not happen in Rwanda (1994), where the criminals were brought down too. (al-Haj Saleh, 2019a)

The dialectic of universalisation and particularisation underlying the process of situating the Syrian struggle within a global historical framework is reminiscent of the experience of Palestinian and Iraqi intellectuals in their distinct journeys into exile. As I will briefly argue in the conclusion chapter, it is a reflection of their search for what Eyerman and Jamison describe as the ‘cosmological dimension’ of a movement’s cognitive praxis; that is, the set of beliefs about the world and their place in it in relation to the movement.

In addition to upholding their cosmopolitan ethos and broadening the relevance of their work for a new audience, the shift in perspective from a local cause to a global one can be understood as a way to reinstate a sense of political agency at a global level where it continued to inhabit the realms of possibility, having lost hope of attaining democratic change at the local level. This is reflected in the following excerpt from a 2017 article by Yassin al-Haj Saleh,

It is better, in my opinion, to base our thinking on the premise that the opportunity for democratic change in Syria has been lost forever and that our renewal has become part of a worldwide change that requires a rethinking of the inherited intellectual and the ethical foundations of liberal democracy. The issue is not that we should give up our aspirations or replace them. But rather, it is to change our modes of thinking and our tools, precisely in order not to change our aspirations for equality, freedom, social justice, human dignity, and the ability to dream of one world which is worth defending. (al-Haj Saleh, 2017d)

## From double consciousness to dual gaze

One of the bolder observations emerging from this research is a suggested paradigm shift in the understanding of the work of Third World intellectuals as exemplified by the Syrian case. This shift entails firstly the abandonment of postcolonial hermeneutics that construes them as perpetual objects of colonial injury and instead presents them as agentic actors on a global scale. In other words, while the previous paradigm takes an interest in how colonialism has impacted upon Third World subjects and shaped their self-perception, the new paradigm focuses on how Third World intellectuals and subjects not only perceive and make ethical judgements about the rest of the world but also engage with it as political actors. Secondly, the shift abandons, though not entirely (see Chapter Four), a previous enlightening role for the Third World intellectual set on to bridge a supposed civilisational gap between her country and an idealised Western model of the modern society, and reimagines their local causes as part of a global struggle against power. Interesting parallels can be drawn between this shift and the discussion in postcolonial trauma studies about an increased focus on resistance, resilience and agency rather than melancholic trauma narratives (see chapter two, pp. 30-31). In other words, as exemplified by the Syrian case, Third World intellectuals are shifting from a *politics of being perceived* to a *politics of perceiving*.

Al-Haj Saleh, for example, recognises a rising sense of personal agency, which he suggests is energised by the Arab revolutions. He says,

Think of the refugees who have crossed seven states to reach safety; this speaks of a strong sense of agency. We were living like a still lake, each an identical droplet of water... Now there is a large number of Syrians with a strong sense of political, epistemological and ethical agency, able to produce judgements related to their surroundings, their lives and the world. I think there has been a

revolution at this level. And it will not be lost. In some way, our intellectual and cultural work must revolve around this issue; this earned sense of agency has changed us very much not just politically but also epistemically and subjectively. (Personal communication, 2018)

Within this paradigm, refugeehood becomes not merely an act of sanctuary but an act of agentic demand for a dignified and safe life and to an opinion, including about the states that make such a life possible on the premise that they are complicit in the subjugation of Third World peoples and as such partly responsible for their refugeehood. This is not to say that critique of Western powers is new to Syrian intellectuals. But criticism was usually directed toward Western hegemony. Now, when addressing 'the West', the weight of discursive investment has shifted away from examining how home society has been impacted by the colonial West, explaining, or indeed fixing, a presumed cultural or civilisational inferiority or dwelling on a position of helpless victimhood. Instead, it has moved toward a broader critique of power where peoples around the world were seen as part of a global majority, including in 'Western' countries, fighting against an unjust order shaped by 'Western' hegemony. Enfolded in this critique is an abandonment of decades of intellectual and emotional investment in subalternity, self-justification and cultural indignity.

This attitude resonates with injunctions by intellectuals like Orelus & Chomsky (2014, p. 120), who urge Third World intellectuals to 'talk back to Western power that refuses to treat them on an equal footing'. But it diverges from them in that it is less concerned with 'making the West respect their culture' (Orelus & Chomsky, 2014, p. 120) than with making its own judgements about it. This new paradigm puts into question a large body of literature on diasporic intellectuals describing their reaction to 'the "civilizational" gap separating their native societies from the "modern" world' (Kostantaras, 2008, p. 704). Most Syrian exilic intellectuals seemed a lot less interested in addressing or bridging any such 'civilisational gap' than in the critique of the state of the world as shaped by 'Western' hegemony. Rather than 'act internationally as ambassadors of their native countries willing to engage in an ideological, and intellectual battle to represent and defend them' (Orelus & Chomsky, 2014, p.120), most expressed a strong disinterest in any such appeasement. And while they continued to mobilise for solidarity within pockets of like-minded activists in their host societies, they seemed to have given up intentions of influencing public opinion at large. In doing so, they echoed Jean Genet's words to Saadallah Wannous in 1982 that 'this public opinion is racist, and it is against Arabs with or without reasons. Don't waste your time appeasing it. Your historical mission is to unsettle it; not to impress it' (Genet, 1982, p. 77). Empowered by newfound confidence generated by their newfound sense of agency, even heroism, they endeavoured to reject ideas such as positive representation and reception. Resounding Genet's position, 'We shouldn't fall into the trap of how we are being received', one participant told me. (Ayham Majid Agha, personal communication, 2018).

Reference to WWII and human rights discourse was recurrent, and a sense of exclusion from such discourse was shared by many participants.

There was, of course, the usual narrative of upholding post-holocaust values. But there was a necessary exclusion of the Middle East region from any such ethics posited as an exceptional and complicated region where people kill each other. (Anonymous participant, Berlin, 2018)

There was a view that '[i]f the Syrian experience has anything to add, it is that all this discourse on post-Holocaust morality was framed within certain geographical limits and confined to them. It wasn't for everybody. They were not human rights but European rights' (Nihad Sirees, personal communication, 2018).

This idea is hardly novel. Many international scholars have argued that the enlightenment and its human rights discourse aimed to transfer power from one elite to another while excluding the colonised and the oppressed from the human rights that these thinkers called for (e.g. Porpora, et al., 2013; Williams, 2010). 'Simply put, the black, the colonized, and the oppressed were not included in the agenda of these European intellectuals as they rebelled against the ignorance perpetuated by the aristocracy within the Catholic Church and clergy in Europe' (Orelus & Chomsky, 2014, p. 116). Unlike Ayta, who continued to cherish enlightenment values and their authors, or Ghalioun and Mobaied, who offered pragmatist justifications for the exclusivity of human rights, these international scholars claim that from the onset, enlightenment intellectuals' 'battle for a so-called better world free from oppression and ignorance was launched for the exclusive benefit of white Europeans, particularly the privileged ones.' (Ibid)

Even when condemnation of Assad's violence was seriously performed by 'Western' politicians, for example, Obama's red line speech after the 2012 chemical massacre, participants saw such positions as further evidence of the West's complicity, objecting to the fact that 'disapproval is only about the *method* of killing;... [as] it constitutes a violation of international treaties.' (Aita, 2017)

All participants alluded to some level of complicity of the international community in protecting Assad and contributing to aborting or diverting the revolution by appending it to the new and rhetorically powerful epistemic space of the war on terror, consequently rendering it dependent on Gulf funding and its geopolitical sectarian agenda.

This was most clearly reflected on September 15<sup>th</sup>, 2016, when 150 Syrian intellectuals issued a statement against the 'immorality of the international political system' as reflected in American and Russian policy. The statement opens as follows,

We, democratic and secular Syrian writers, artists and journalists who have opposed the regime of Assadist tyranny for decades and have contributed to the struggle for democracy and justice in our country, our region and the world, want to express our deep condemnation to the approaches of the two powers interfering in Syria, the USA and Russia, and their role, at least since 2013, in appending Syrians' emancipatory struggle to a 'war against terrorism' whose track record is void of a single success story, and rife with evidence of destruction in a number of countries. (Al Arabi Al Jadeed, 2016)

Many participants, whether in explicit or tacit terms, alluded to what Zulaika in his chapter 'Terrorism and the Betrayal of the Intellectuals' (2016, p.55) terms the 'conspiracy of silence', a silence in the face of atrocity which becomes adequate when the enemy is construed within the war on terror framework where 'we are more than justified to murder ... and still be, not only innocent, but heroes'.

And yet, the above-discussed disillusionment with the moral superiority and social progress in the West interacted with long-held respect for 'Western' societies and varying degrees of referentiality to 'Western' culture and history in terms of progress aspirations<sup>85</sup>. This was reflected on multiple occasions, particularly during interviews. For example, in our interview, Samira Mobaied, an academic and activist living and working in Paris, emphasises how European societies 'live by principles of justice' explaining that while Syria might be a 'secondary issue for them', they are eager to know what is happening. In her discourse, a fundamentally just and democratic European society can influence international politics since 'peoples in these countries *do* influence the political decision'. Later in the same interview, Mobaied suggests that 'the Syrian revolution has revealed that there is no freedom of the press in the West' and that 'the media is largely directed and full of misinformation.'

Interviews and document analysis were rife with examples of this admiration-condemnation dyad. Ghalioun explains in our interview how 'the biggest investment that Syrians have made in this revolution has been the million who fled to Europe' who 'will be educated and formed in a modern way' and deems the West today as 'the most mature frame for the values of modernity where democracy is being practised, where the sciences are advancing, and where the centre of civilisation today resides'. Simultaneously, in an earlier article, Ghalioun attributes the international community's neglect of Syria's war crimes and crimes against humanity file to 'the end of belief in the grand principles upon which the post-WWII era and its peace were based'. The West's 'lethargic abandonment of its international commitments' is, in his view, covered up by 'calculated lies to mislead public opinion about what is really happening in Syria' (Ghalioun, 2017a). In another article, he maintains that democratic states are 'proclaiming freedom and justice as cover for hegemony and as a source of legitimacy for their global influence and dominance' making reference to an '*illusion* (emphasis added) about the legal and ethical sophistication of our times' (Ghalioun, 2017b).

The 'double consciousness' which may have shaped how exilic intellectuals viewed themselves as diasporic Arabs (Abdul-Jabbar, 2015), seemed overtaken by a dual gaze that shaped how they viewed their host societies.

However, the distinction was often clear in this dual gaze between admiration for 'Western' *culture* and condemnation of *states* and their *politics*. With this, there was prevalent recognition that there are people - 'primarily intellectuals and academics' - who show

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<sup>85</sup> This is not to say that Syrian intellectuals interacted with or referred to ideas produced in the Europe more than those produced by compatriots or other Arab thinkers. Nor is it to imply that they affiliated progressive values with an exclusively Western intellectual tradition. Rather it is about a perception of European societies as more democratically advanced than others in the global periphery.

solidarity towards Syria but that they 'don't represent the public opinion'. (Faruk Mardam Bey, personal communication). Ayta similarly admitted that while he 'lost trust in international political institutions' and their seriousness about upholding enlightenment values, he still cherish[ed] 'the values, cultures and authors who theorised them' (Personal communication, 2018). Indeed, for decades, the Arab intellectual was seen as the embodiment of such values (Halabi, 2017), and their complete abandonment would be tantamount to self-dereliction.

To recap, the data alludes to a possible paradigm shift in the work of Third World intellectuals. Examining how Syrian exiled intellectuals see and relate to their host societies signals a latent move from a politics of the self-directed gaze by which they are concerned with 'making the West respect their culture' (Orelus & Chomsky, 2014, p. 120) to a politics of a West-directed gaze in which they 'make ethical judgements about the world' and its powers (al-Haj Saleh, personal communication, 2018). This entails an 'internal critique' of their take on Syria and the postcolonial world more broadly. It is an 'internal critique' in the sense that it construes the 'Western' approach as flawed by its own standards. In other words, this study showed that Syrian exiled intellectuals were more concerned with how they saw the West, as Other, than with how that Other saw them (e.g. Said) or how it influenced the way in which they saw themselves (e.g. Du Bois). It is not a shift towards Occidentalism. As I have sufficiently insisted, the object of study remains the home society. Rather, it is a potential emancipation from the oppressive omnipresence of the Other's (internal) gaze. 'I don't care whether they see us at all!' Ayham Majid Agha scoffed at my question about how he would like Syrians to be seen by their Western hosts (personal communication, 2018).

In the next section, I will explore how this dual gaze towards Western societies interacted with views on assimilation and cultural integration policies.

### **The question of integration**

Not unlike some of the literature on integration which finds the notion to be contentious and ill-defined (e.g. Castles, et al., 2002), participants problematised the idea of integration. While the necessity of adapting to their new life and socio-political context was recognised by participants, certain state-led cultural integration initiatives were often described as hegemonist, nationalist, 'essentialist' and 'strange'. The notion of assimilation was rejected on three main principles. Its rejection was anti-hegemonic, i.e. part of the discourse against Western cultural domination premised on its cultural superiority. It was post-nationalist, i.e. part of the inclination to think beyond nationalism and its assumptions about the existence of homogenous and definable national identities. And it was anti-xenophobic, i.e. part of a broader resistance to anti-immigrant sentiments. I will elaborate on these three positions.

The first and most common basis for anti-integrationist arguments was a critique of host states' historical hegemony and current political positions. For example, Berlin-based actor and playwright Ayham Majid Agha's denunciation of Germany's cultural integration policies suggests a causal connection between such policies and insubordinate attitudes towards host societies. After reading a provocative excerpt from one of his plays which sarcastically depicts German preconceptions about Syrian men, he tells me indignantly, 'we are not

allowed in a swimming pool without a woman. It is because we are Arabs. We are asked to read a book on how to flirt with a German woman. This is an inflammatory attitude. The least I can do is respond with a text like this' (Personal communication, 2018).

Similar intersections between gendered prejudice and racist discrimination were present in accounts of gendered orientalism by women participants influencing attitudes towards host societies and the question of integration. For women, this manifested in demand to complicate gendered stereotypes about Arab women as conservative, premodern or victimised: 'if you are a Syrian woman writer non-hijabi, democratic and secular, then you are a creature from space. They have prejudices towards all Arabs' Rosa Yassin Hassan objects while discussing her reception as a writer in Germany (personal communication, 2018).

This understanding of their host societies' perceptions towards them marked attitudes towards them by a sense of disconnect and defiance. Majid Agha's attitude at his workplace, at the Maxim Gorki Theatre in Berlin, is one of incitement and mutiny - not acquiescence or conciliation. 'I incriminate the West', he tells me, describing how he 'wrote a play demanding that European countries return our stolen money deposited by Arab rulers in their governments' banks. When they do that, we will leave as they ask'.

The second basis for the anti-assimilationist stance revolved around a post-national discourse. Reluctant to surrender to traditional notions of homeland and national belonging, they nevertheless acknowledged the bureaucratic necessity of citizenship for any personal agency over their already precarious lives.

This idea of a homeland constructed around a passport and valid identification papers does not appeal to me. It seems like a vulgar symbolic image. But a life without papers is a life in which you have very little choice, and that too was one of the crueller faces of exile [...] I was scared of opting for a decent life in a homeland with which my only connection was identification papers and a passport. (Al Attar, 2015)

An element of justification seems to underlie Attar's words, written in Arabic for an Arabic-speaking audience; an assurance that he has not abandoned his country in search for a new and better homeland but that his interest in acquiring a new passport was motivated merely by a practical need to have freedom of movement and rights. His later allusion to the impossibility of truly belonging also suggests a pre-emptive facet in his pragmatist approach to new citizenship; the pride of rejecting so as not to feel rejected. He says, 'I don't want to become German or European. Even if I wanted to, I would never truly become one. This knowledge is enough to create a rupture with any fantasy of a surrogate homeland'.

Ziad Adwan, who calls for replacing '*integration*' with '*coexistence*' as a more reciprocal approach, was more direct in expressing his post-nationalist beliefs. He suggests that 'one of the reasons the revolution erupted is that the nation-state itself has become a failing structure'. He contends that as it becomes less and less viable economically, socially and culturally, it is reduced to pure 'bureaucracy' (Personal communication, 2018).

In Paris, where integration policies were relatively invisible, refugees' resistance towards forming a new belonging was linked not to the controversial nature of their arrival in Europe. Writer and translator and Badr-Eddine Arodaky, who has lived in France since 1972, says 'the West, generally speaking, has not welcomed Syrian refugees and I am not misled



by the support of a few intellectuals and journalists [...] this makes them cling to their Syrian identity' (personal communication, 2018). Similarly, long-time exiled intellectual, author, and publisher Farouk Mardam Bey tells me based on his own experience with newcomers that 'many young refugees were prudent about belonging to their host country, especially in countries, like France, where they did not feel welcomed,'. Comparing their situation with that of refugees in Germany, he adds, 'The young people who came here faced serious problems with housing... In Germany, many cultural organisations adopted Syrian intellectuals, organised seminars for them, translated their work to German, supported them'. He suggests that post-2011 exiled intellectuals in Paris 'remained marginal' and that this 'engendered in them an even stronger attachment to their original belonging and a sense of alienation from the new society'.

But whereas lack of state support in France created alienation, state support in Germany came with heavy-handed state-controlled and sometimes intrusive integration policies, which were often experienced as humiliating and resulted in a similar sense of alienation and defensive attachment to home identity among forcibly displaced writers and artists.

In addition to being more prevalent in Germany (where integration policies are considerably more invasive) than in France, it is worth noting that anti-integration discourse was expressed mostly by young to middle generation intellectuals. Older intellectuals, particularly those who have engaged in serious discussion with representatives of host states on the situation in Syria, seemed certain of Western states' knowledge of Assad's brutality and their concern, if disengaged, vis-à-vis the mass extermination, political persecution and humanitarian crisis taking place in the country. These older intellectuals were more inclined to attribute Western inaction to geopolitical or economic factors avoiding implications of complicity or a language of condemnation. While they did not support integration policies as such, they seemed much less concerned with them and generally more inclined to perform cultural accord than discord.

Finally, anti-assimilationism was sometimes critiqued by way of anti-essentialism. Some participants' objection to cultural integration was based on the view that as a notion, it was fundamentally essentialist and premised on ignorance or misconceptions about refugees' home culture. Indeed, research suggests a negative correlation between the existence of cultural misconceptions and the likelihood of refugee integration (Mestheneos & Ioannidi, 2002, p. 311). In this study, several participants implied that cultural integration policies were patronising and offensive, particularly those which seemed to assume and generalise certain stereotypes about Syrian culture. Dara Abdulla, a Berlin-based journalist, contends that 'there is no such thing as integration within *German* society'. He describes the whole project as 'deceitful trickery'. Highlighting that national populations are not homogeneous entities but enormously divided by class, region, belief, and lifestyle, he asks, 'which Germans exactly are we requested to integrate with? And then, who is this we? ... We ourselves are diverse groups distributed across disparate ethnicities, identities, regions and lifestyles'. (Abdullah, 2017b)

Majid Agha suggests a wilful ignorance framed by racist or Orientalist views: 'They don't want to know. All they know is that we are designed to fight each other and that we have

ISIS.’ He negates the view that Europeans empathise with Syrians as victims of a tyrannical regime, suggesting that if this were the case ‘they wouldn’t have demanded to send us back. Even people on the political left... They all want us to go back. There are headlines every day trying to prove how reactionary we are’ (Personal communication, 2018). All of this exacerbated a sense of ‘cultural insult’ (Roy, 2003), which fed resistance to the idea of cultural integration.

One can then speak of a triple injury to which Syrian exiled intellectuals felt that their people were subjected: a historic ‘cultural insult’ as part of the defeated Middle East and the subjugated global periphery; perceived Western complicity in the Syrian catastrophe; and a highly publicised refugee ‘crisis’ that accompanied their arrival into Europe. This triple injury may have fed scepticism towards notions of integration as already discussed, but it was not the source of it- I suggest that the idea of ‘cultural integration’ when experienced personally is offensive to cosmopolitan intellectuals everywhere. The injury may, however, have provoked a surge of cultural pride which overpowered decades of cultural critique at home. If citizens of post-colonial societies are ‘still flinching from the cultural insult... still caught up in the business of “disproving” the white world’s definition of us’ (Roy, 2003, p. 13), then the Arab revolutions have provided some redemption. This sense of redemption sometimes manifested in a surge of cultural and identitarian pride among Syrian exiled intellectuals; one which is reflected in the following excerpt from Majid Agha’s interview,

I want people [Syrians] to understand that they come from a place with a history and with cultural wealth. I want them to realise that they had worthy lives which they are merely trying to resume, not that they are “starting from zero”, no matter how much they’ve lost. (2018)

Such cultural pride and self-knowledge were sometimes framed as an entry point towards understanding the host society. ‘You can only enter a new culture through your own’, one anonymous participant told me. ‘In Syria, before the revolution, we took no interest in religious people because as intellectuals, we were supposed to be modernist enlighteners’ he adds, explaining how exile has brought him closer to diverse facets of his home culture and various sectors of its society. This reexamination of Syrian society and accompanying revisionist reconstructions of its history and identity were catalysts for a new and much more egalitarian relationality with Western societies. One upon which the paradigm shift I suggest is crucially based.

## **Discussion**

Following migration into Europe, the Syrian cause remained at the centre of exiled intellectuals’ interventions, now viewed through a more universalist-cum-Eurocentric lens; universalist in that it shifted focus from local specifics to universal abstractions; genocide, violence, displacement, etc.; Euro-centric in that it prompted stylistic and hermeneutic transpositions which brought interventions closer to new audiences, particularly cultural mediators in a promising refugee-culture-industry. This universalising/Europeanising impact of exile was sometimes sublimated as ‘critical distance’.

Two currents can be recognised in participants' response to their new audience: one that focused on cultural difference and had a self-Orientalising effect and another that focused on similarity and can be described as a cosmopolitanising force. The first generally corresponded to a market economy and the latter to NGO funding interests and the opportunities presented by 'revolution grants'. Participants in this study subscribed to the latter. But while they presented a universalising trauma narrative that connected the Syrian tragedy with other world events or discourses, they often reflected a sense of exceptionalism not only in relation to failures like fragmentation as discussed in Chapter Two but also vis-à-vis the tragic nature of their trauma, particularly in relation to its political outcome, i.e. the ability of the Assad regime to survive and become gradually rehabilitated despite its atrocities.

This sense of exceptionalism and the perceived responsibility of the international community in it fostered multi-layered and often conflicted attitudes and views toward host societies where inner tensions between referentiality and condemnation were loosely negotiated. On the one hand, reference to values that have a genealogy in a European tradition of 'political humanism' (see Kassab, 2019) bred referentiality to universal political values which Europe had championed at least since the 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>86</sup>. On the other hand, perception of complicity even betrayal vis-à-vis the Syrian cause bred disdain. Moreover, the surge in anti-immigrant sentiments accompanied by disenchantment with the image of Western democracy, particularly the disillusioning experience with Western media, further complicated the relationship. This dual gaze can be linked to a dichotomy prevalent among other diaspora intellectuals whose writings, it is suggested (e.g. Kostantaras, 2008, pp. 701-703), are 'heavily laden with expressions of distress over the attitudes directed by the host society towards their place of origin' (condemnation), but who also exhibit some degree of internalisation of such attitudes when addressing home nations' problems with a candour aimed at establishing objectivity and conforming to the assumptions of host societies (referentiality). While not identical to it, this tension resonates strongly with the dual gaze that I have alluded to in this chapter.

Disenchantment with Western societies and some of their intellectuals (see, for example, Palmer, 2016) and condemnation of their governments' foreign policy influenced participants' attitudes towards integration, particularly in Germany where integration policies were state-led and broadly perceived as 'patronising' (Hindy, 2018). Many problematised cultural integration as a notion, conflating it with assimilation and resisting it in practice. This manifested most particularly in weariness towards quickly mastering the new language or entering into the job market or local professional or intellectual milieus. The problematisation of host societies' discourse on integration, and its underlying assumption of fundamental difference, seemed consistent with the cosmopolitanising shift discussed earlier but was also associated with the social script for what it is to be a critical

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<sup>86</sup> According to Kassab (2019, p. 8), this political humanism 'calls for the free and public practice of reason in view of producing knowledge that enlightens people about the realities they find themselves in and nurtures their yearning for a dignified and free existence... [and] the reclaiming of the right to political participation.

cosmopolitan intellectual<sup>87</sup>. This outlook made state-led integration policies and their exaggerated suppositions about cultural divergence seem 'Orientalist', 'inflammatory' and 'ethnonationalist'. Some interviews suggested that the problematisation of integration was not only instigated by a critical position towards the views of host countries vis-à-vis home society but more so by the controversy surrounding their arrival as refugees in Europe. The two are arguably related. And yet, resistance to integration is not unique to the Syrian context nor to the presence of the above-mentioned factors. As an example, studying the lives of German intellectuals exiled to the United States during WWII, Krohn (1993, p. 192) suggests that the 'damaged lives' of emigrés intellectuals were due less to a 'shattering of continuity' than to a 'lack of interest in becoming integrated'.

Paradoxically, while cosmopolitan in spirit, anti-integration discourse sometimes energised a cultural pride that shifted focus from an enlightenment mission back home, often invested in cultural self-flagellation (see for example Bardawil, 2010) to a defensive form of nationalist-revisionist advocacy sometimes engaging in cultural self-worship and fetishism of local particularities, particularly at the grassroots level. This will be discussed in Chapter Four. Kostantaras (2008, p. 715) holds that the 'lofty pride' and 'the quest for distinction and honor' reflected in statements made by diaspora intellectuals in various cultural contexts reflect an 'idealisation of the wounded self' and form a 'new national imaginary' shaped by a 'stung and self-righteous declaration of splendid apartness'. Similarly, Kostantaras holds that diaspora intellectuals demonstrate the maxim of Lord Acton that 'exile is the nursery of nationality' (2008, p. 700). But despite this heightened sense of cultural self-confidence, rather than 'work tirelessly to heighten and defend the national dignity and of their countries', (Orelus & Chomsky, 2014), exiled Syrian intellectuals' focus has shifted toward equalising their critical field by redirecting their gaze globally.

According to Chawich (2004), resistance to a new belonging in the West and the resultant in-between position of exiles is caused by a conflation between belonging and loyalty. Seemingly inspired by Du Bois's notion of the 'double consciousness', he attributes this to two inconsistent psychological phenomena: the first is 'captivation' - the unconscious belief in the superiority of the Western subject - and the second is 'captivation-phobia' - a pathological fear of such captivity which drives the immigrant to reject over-identifying with the host society (Chawich, 2004). I believe that this tendency to attribute the in-between position of Third World diaspora intellectuals to a matter of post-colonial insecurities as reflected in Chawich's analysis and much post-colonial writing and as implied in Orelus & Chomsky (2014), Konstantaras (2008) and others (e.g. Black, 2007, p. 399; Abdul-Jabbar, 2015) is imprecise. Immigrant intellectuals of all backgrounds, including descendants of colonial countries, are known for their in-between position between cultures. Illustrating this point, Krohn (1993, p. 179) recounts how Paul Tillich saw the creative spirit as 'the permanent emigré in the world'; and how American sociologist Louis

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<sup>87</sup> The word 'script' is borrowed from dramaturgical language. It refers to pre-established patterns of behaviour that actors follow or are expected to follow in specific social situations. I borrow the term loosely in as much as I use it not to refer to everyday interpersonal situations as Goffman originally intended, but more broadly in reference to behavioural repertoires that inform people's choices. E.g. what people do at various life stages or how a revolutionary intellectual ought to react to a popular uprising.

Wirth considered the concept of 'intellectual emigrants' to be a contradiction of terms because intellectuals, in his view, are 'always nomads in the universe of the mind and should feel at home anywhere'.

The data collected does not clearly indicate whether Chawich himself has, since the above-cited 2004 article, become part of the shift away from a politics of self-perception or self-evaluation suggested in this chapter. But it does suggest that his ideas about captivation with Western society and the purported fear of such captivation would seem particularly dissonant within the cognitive praxis of the movement and the emergent ideas and attitudes intellectuals are developing toward Europe. Indeed, this research has shown that exiled intellectuals' supposed fascination with host societies has been complicated by a growing sense of agency and is more influenced by their own ethical judgements towards these societies and their governments' political failings than by a fear of captivation. Energised by a recaptured faith in 'the people' and a growing disdain towards an unjust and unsustainable world order complicit in creating a grim sequence of global crises; economic, environmental, democratic, health-related and security-related, participants seem to be deconstructing this sense of historic inferiority and capturing self-narratives of empowerment, epistemic authority, and cultural self-respect that subvert a previous ethos of impotence, inferiority and despair.

A potential paradigm shift is then observable in the work of diasporic intellectuals. Heretofore characterised by a focus on how the global periphery, and its intellectuals, are inhabited by the Western 'Other', the study of Third World intellectuals has been saturated with a postcolonial hermeneutics that has met its aporia and calls for re-assessment, refocusing and transposition. The suggested paradigm shift is characterised by a change in the direction of focus from a *politics of being perceived* (how the West sees the Third World or influences its self-perception) to a *politics of perceiving* (how the Third World and its intellectuals see and make ethical judgements about the West). This shift is enabled by a sense of empowerment and emancipation vis-à-vis the dominant Other related to two key developments. Firstly, the 'cultural *insult*' of colonialism is overtaken by a sense of *cultural redemption* rooted in self-respect engendered by emancipatory movements against dictatorship, social injustice, and corruption. Secondly, this *cultural redemption* is paired with a strengthening sense of outrage and disillusionment toward Western hegemony, its claims of moral superiority and its domestic and global failures. It is also influenced by now European cultural funding and by the need to resonate, even when addressing Syria, with a new and more global audience.

This paradigm shift was most obvious in interview statements expressing disinterest in questions related to the West's perception. Such statements, as Baert reminds us (2015), should not be taken at face value, but data from document analysis and participant observation also show disinterest in cultural representation and a focus on interventions that critically situate the Syrian war in a global context. Examples of this can be seen in the discourse on how neglecting Syrians is resulting in the 'Syrianization' of the world, critiques of a world order premised on alleged Western superiority (moral and other); or tripartite construction of oppression which links together colonialism, Islamism and authoritarianism (al-Haj Saleh, 2017e). Partly because this was not the type of work that attracted funding, one might speak of a tension between earlier described representational work which drew

funding and between this emerging politics of perceiving manifested in a critical global perspective.

Another factor that may have contributed to this paradigm shift is a growing perception that there was an absence of serious intellectual effort by Western thinkers to explain what was happening in the region as well as a disappointment among Arab intellectuals vis-à-vis the ease with which large segments of Western Society reduced the Arab Spring to a conflict between autocracy and Islamic extremism or to a geopolitical struggle between Iran and Gulf countries or sectarian strife between Sunnis-Shias (see Qaddour, 2019). The few who supported the Arab revolutions, he suggests, were primarily driven by ethical partialities and compassion with victims of despotism but did not back such compassion with any serious knowledge or thought that might inform related policy. Qaddour suggests that if contemporary Arab culture was accused of Western referentiality – on the basis of an advanced Western thought tradition, including its contributions to anti-colonial critiques of Eurocentrism and Orientalism – there is a dearth today in such advanced thought. I agree with Qaddour that such thought is important not only for the East but also in addressing European crises, which are connected today more than any time in the past with its policies in the Arab region. Its absence and the recognition of its importance have opened a niche for diasporic Arab intellectuals, notably those exiled from Syria.

As for their role within host societies, it is likely that professional and social integration will increase gradually with time on account of two factors. Firstly, the entry of a new generation of exiles into Western universities has enabled language attainment at an early age and consequently better integration into cultural and intellectual milieus. Secondly, the shift away from the local towards the universal or the global in exiled intellectuals' work means that their future work will be relevant to a broader audience and will increasingly engage with cultural actors, intellectual circles and audiences in host societies.

In the meantime, the creation of a field of 'exiled intellectuals' in the Saidian sense, i.e. intellectuals 'who because of exile cannot, or, more to the point, will not make the adjustment, preferring instead to remain outside the mainstream, unaccommodated, un-co-opted, resistant' (Said, 1996 [1993], p. 113) is assisted by the lack of employment opportunities as well as by resistance to integration. This is an important position through which Syrian and other diasporic intellectuals escaping social and political upheaval have the potential to unsettle current intellectual traditions in ways that may help address current aporia. In the context of post-1989 events in Eastern Europe, previous traditions related to the role of the intelligentsia were reinvented in ways that contributed to great social transformation, inspiring intellectuals in other parts of the world (Eyerman, 1994, p. 200). As global interaction widens, intellectuals in peripheral contexts, instigated by dramatic socio-political change and other forms of cultural trauma, can signal the 'closing of local "intellectual" contexts and the fading of tradition' (Ibid). Whether Syrian intellectuals in exile will influence intellectual traditions beyond their own milieu is unclear. Several of my interviewees alluded to such potential such as Berlin-based author Nihad Sirees who expects 'something new to emerge from the shocking events now taking place in Syria'. 'Everybody is talking about it with fear now' he observes, 'but will this not lead to innovative intellectual achievements?' It will be some time before any such contribution can become discernible, but it is an area that future research can keep an eye on.

## Chapter Four

### Between critical liminality and radical embeddedness

The tensions between elitism and egalitarianism so central to the study of intellectuals (e.g. Kurzman, 2002) is also pivotal in the Syrian debate. This chapter contributes to our understanding of this tension not only by showing the impact of radical epistemic egalitarianism<sup>88</sup> in the context of a revolutionary movement but also by recognising the role of ‘movement intellectuals’ particularly those rising from marginalised segments of society, in inverting the normative power structures of intellectual elitism. Many observations examined in this chapter, including the notion of a populist anti-intellectualism among intellectuals, have been alluded to in intellectuals’ self-reflective descriptions, i.e. in theoretical analyses made by intellectuals about intellectuals. But important as such observations are to the understanding of the role (existing and potential) intellectuals see for themselves in political change, there is a need to examine them empirically. If the sociology of intellectuals has taken a normative approach offering insights on how intellectuals ought to behave (Kurzman & Owens, 2002, p. 82), a trend certainly also reflected in the Syrian debates, what it lacks is an empirical examination of intellectual practice (ibid).

This chapter critically examines the dynamics that underlie how exiled Syrian intellectuals relate to their home societies, societies from which they are physically separated but in which they overwhelmingly continue to be immersed, intellectually, socially, politically and emotionally, and for which they continue to speak.

#### Equality/hierarchy tensions

According to Baert (2015, p. 185), public intellectuals can be divided based on their intellectual positioning in relation to their publics into three types: the ‘authoritative’, the ‘expert’ and the ‘embedded’ public intellectual. In the latter part of the twentieth century, when the position of authoritative public intellectual was no longer as tenable as it used to be, the ‘expert’ position became the endorsed model of relationality, at least in Europe, whereby the intellectual does not make claims outside her area of specialisation but relies on acquired knowledge in a specific field of expertise to make specific and focused interventions. Both the authoritative and the expert intellectuals maintain a position of epistemic superiority vis-à-vis the public. Similarly, Foucault (1980, p. 126) describes what he calls the ‘specific intellectual’ as one who shifts focus from ‘the modality of the “universal”’ to ‘specific sectors’ and ‘the precise points where their own conditions of life or

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<sup>88</sup> Epistemic egalitarianism is here qualified as the idea that intellectuals are not intrinsically in a better position to make political knowledge claims.

work situate them'. However, this expert knowledge still aims to provide the tools which enable others to make decisions. In this sense, it still adopts a logic of epistemic hierarchy implicit in the 'enabling' role towards the public. Contrastingly, 'embedded' public intellectuals 'present themselves as equals to their publics, learning as much from them as vice versa'. They avoid 'dictating an ideological agenda or imposing a political direction' and engage with their publics instead in a collaborative manner, enabled by new technologies and general distrust towards previous hierarchies (Baert, 2015, p.188). The 'embedded' approach is premised on a commitment to an equal partnership with the community and equal responsibility for achieving shared political goals; a 'mutually empowering project based on trust, reciprocity, and solidarity—and, therefore, on openness towards the possibility of learning from one another' (Baert & Susen, 2017, p. 41).

Historically, Syrian intellectuals' relationality with Syrian society has been heavily influenced by their predominantly Marxist inclination (see, for example, Bardawil, 2010; 2018; Frangie, 2011). In this study, this manifested in a materialist conception of history; a class-based approach which puts the working class or 'the people' *alshaab* and their interests at the centre of discussions; the invocation of Marxist and neo-Marxist thinkers when thinking about intellectuals and their role; and a commitment to a progressivist emancipatory understanding of the intellectual's responsibility. In all of this, the intellectual speaks from a position of *authority* to call for *equality*. Moroccan historian and philosopher Abdallah Laroui linked the popularity of Marxism among Arab intellectuals to its capacity to unite politics and theory (1976 cited in Frangie, 2011, p. 49). It is mostly through this political dimension that Arab intellectuals have claimed a public role, usually from a vantage point of epistemic authority. Elsewhere it has been argued that the Marxist orientation of intellectuals is the outcome of a hierarchically driven relationality that seeks a sense of purpose and distinction by assuming a leadership role in society (e.g. Lilla, 2016, p. 383). Such an understanding of the relationship between intellectuals and their publics takes as its starting point a 'déclassé model' for studying intellectuals. The 'déclassé model' construes intellectuals as individuals who, having lost their class status, seek in education and the enlightenment model of the public intellectual a means of achieving distinction. Such distinction, however, is inevitably dependent on the masses and the saviour/leader/prophet role the public intellectual could perform for them (see, for example, Alexander, 2016).

However, in addition to the egalitarianism-authoritativeness paradigm that a Marxist understanding of the role of the intellectual energised, intellectualism in the region was historically influenced by the model of the 'enlightenment intellectual' and defined in relation to a *nahdawi* modernising project and intellectuals' *tanwiri* 'enlightening' role within it (Haydari, 2013; Kassab, 2019; Bardawil, 2018). Even as they positioned themselves against the state starting in the 1970s, Syrian intellectuals hardly questioned this secularising and modernising project. They separated themselves from the 'common people' and though their work intended to express their needs, it was also expected to act as a 'vector' in the process of modernisation (Bardawil, 2018, p. 178). Said's *Representations of the Intellectual* (1993) reflects this separation which valorises an 'outsider' position where the intellectual is always 'at odds with their society' (p. 52).



Furthermore, the separation was reinforced by post-colonial dictatorships aiming to repress, isolate and often delegitimise the critical intellectual within society.

Meanwhile, in Europe, the position of authority through which 'leftist' intellectuals intervened in public affairs was resisted by a generation of French intellectuals, particularly after the events of May '68 through which 'the intellectual discovered that the masses no longer need her to gain knowledge' and that indeed 'they know far better than he and they are certainly capable of expressing themselves.' (Foucault, 1977, p. 207)

In *Truth and Power* (1984, p. 67), Foucault, objects that

For a long period, the "left" intellectual spoke and was acknowledged the right of speaking in the capacity of master of truth and justice. He was heard, or purported to make himself heard, as the spokesman of the universal. To be an intellectual meant something like being the consciousness/conscience of us all<sup>89</sup>."

The move away from authoritative models of public intellectualism increasingly generated a self-understanding among intellectuals as intertwined with their publics and part of communal collectives. This was further accelerated by new technologies and the multiple ways in which they changed the type of interactions between intellectuals and their publics (Baert & Booth, 2012). With this turn, intellectuals have increasingly replaced their authoritative stance with a more egalitarian attitude toward their publics. Syrian intellectuals have not been insulated from these shifts.

But if Foucault's 'special intellectual' can be seen as a product of tensions between authoritative and egalitarianist inclinations, it was a tenuous alternative to the authoritative model in Syria. This is because, in the absence of an academic environment that might engage intellectuals, a weak research agenda with almost non-existent funding, and a securitised higher education system that purged critical intellectuals (Dillabough, et al., 2019), uninhibited specific intervention into local situations was almost impossible. With the 'specific' mode of engagement hardly plausible, theoretical, individualist and generalist interventions continued to be the predominant mode with an almost complete absence of empirical work. This left most intellectuals oscillating between -and internally negotiating- authoritative and embedded modes of engagement with the public.

Such contradictions within the public intellectual concerning *leadership* versus *solidarity-from-below* are neither recent nor unique to the context of this study. As early as 1979, Boggs (p. 22) describes the intellectual stratum as 'laden with contradictions', including the coexistence of 'technocratic' and 'emancipatory' tendencies. More recently, Baert & Booth (2012) identified four sets of contradictions or 'tensions' within the public intellectual, including the tension between 'hierarchy' and 'equality'. Both these sets of contradictions allude to the fundamental question on the relationship between the intellectual and the society they speak for: do they lead, or do they follow. Do they critique and direct, or do they articulate, accept, describe and listen?

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<sup>89</sup> Ironically, despite practising the 'embedded intellectual' positionality to an extreme form, Yassin al-Haj Saleh acquired the nickname 'the consciousness of the revolution'.

It was not until after the 2011 movement that most Syrian intellectuals began to seriously question the enlightening and leadership roles of the intellectual. This made way for a radical form of the embedded positionality in which intellectuals aligned with what they perceived to be the general leaning amongst the masses. Sometimes this alignment included anti-intellectualist sentiments, an extreme form of epistemic egalitarianism that ultimately weakened intellectuals' political and ideational influence, as this chapter will argue. I want to emphasise here that *both* egalitarianism and vanguardism continued to mark the ways in which intellectuals related to their publics, a tension that was evident not only in the two resulting modes of positionality but also often *within* the same participant, as I will soon elaborate.

### The rise of the embedded intellectual

In 2011, the previous model of attempting to reconcile progressive, egalitarian politics with a position of epistemic power and superiority was significantly complicated by a mass movement that demonstrated a revolutionary spirit that intellectuals had called for but failed to instigate for decades. Plaguing intellectuals with self-doubt as it highlighted their inability and triggered a sense of failure, it simultaneously inspired unprecedented respect for 'the people' - broadly defined as pro-revolution Syrian publics particularly the subaltern - who had long been dismissed as submissive and reactionary but who were now at the centre of a revolutionary movement. At the time of this study, these tensions seemed to be central to exiled intellectuals' individual and collective self-understanding as they tried to reconcile an assuming emancipatory role with a modest egalitarian ethos, taken aback, awed and confused by the courage and sacrifices taking place on Syria's streets.

As a result of the uprising and after years of estrangement, participants observed a remarkable shift in their relationship with the public. Academic and playwright Ziad Adwan describes how a presumably inherent difference in social temperament was overcome during the uprising: 'Intellectuals liked to spend time with books while laypeople spent time with each other. In 2011, they found beautiful ways in which to meet' (personal communication, 2018). Hussein Chawich describes a 'strong relationship' and effective 'two-way communication' between intellectuals and 'the people' in the first two years of the revolution. Similarly, Al-Haj Saleh believes that a 'structural rupture between high culture - the culture of intellectuals, thinkers, and artists- and the general public had been bridged in the first two years of the revolution' (Personal communication, 2018). Abou Laban describes how at the height of the protests, intellectuals and artists would take to the streets and venture into disadvantaged and often religiously conservative areas of Damascus: 'You wouldn't have seen Yassin Haj Saleh or Michel Kilo in Douma or in Barze or other social environments which had no access to or interest in their ideas (Personal communication, 2018).

Not only were intellectuals now closer to 'the people', but they also felt indebted to them. Baderddin Arodaki, who believes that 'the only true intellectual is the critical intellectual'

suggests that by overcoming the chronic trauma of persecution<sup>90</sup> and breaking a decades-old 'barrier of fear', the revolting youth allowed intellectuals in Syria to reclaim their critical role, to be 'rejuvenated' and to be 'set free' (Personal communication, 2018). Similarly, Sobhi Hadidi contends that the 'doubly violated dignity' of the Syrian intellectual - firstly as a subject of dictatorship and additionally as 'disbarred, and castrated' – was immediately restored when they 'felt empowered by the masses and their uprising' (Personal communication, 2018).

It is not surprising that the model of the embedded intellectuals was acquiring predominance among oppositionist public intellectuals in such circumstances<sup>91</sup>. However, it was often performed in a manner so amplified that it approximated *fetishism*.

The desired embeddedness within the multitude was reflected in an expressed desire to demolish any distinction between the intellectuals and (lay) people. During interviews, when a question about the relationship between the two was asked, it was challenged with a repudiation of the existence of any such binary. Ghalioun's reply started with 'I don't believe in the conception of intellectuals as a special class that is separate from the people. They are one with the people' and Yassin al-Haj Saleh said 'We are part of the multitude' adding,

I don't agree with talk that comes from a dichotomy that assumes intellectuals live on one plain and the multitude on another. The multitude does not exist. The common person does not exist. The more you observe people, the more you realise that society is a spectrum extending from ultraviolet to infrared. Where a schism does exist, ... it is politically manufactured. It is not some distance or ivory tower created by the intellectual but the result of systematic and politically motivated actions.

This embedded and indebted position resulted in two complications which, as I will argue, undermined intellectuals' sense of responsibility and influence. By assuming the position that 'the multitude does not exist' (al-Haj Saleh, personal communication, 2017), intellectuals erased the (lay) 'other' against whom to define their collective self in the social imaginary. As Eyerman emphasises, the intellectual is formed in opposition to a certain Other (who is not an intellectual) within a specific and temporal context (Eyerman, 1994, pp. 33-34). In other words, when there is no 'them' (the lay masses), there is no 'us' (the intellectuals), and accordingly, there cannot be any shared or 'our' specific responsibility as intellectuals. This had the effect of diluting what was previously a fairly unambiguous conception of the 'intellectual', their role and their responsibilities. At the cultural-epistemic level, this seems to have contributed to the weakening of intellectuals' sense of social responsibility, softening the nature of their interventions, and ultimately undermining their ideational influence. At the structural-political level, the radically embedded position

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<sup>90</sup> It is significant here that the generation most active in the uprising had not been born early enough to witness the atrocious events of the 70s and 80s and the chronic trauma of persecution prevented the generation of their parents from passing it on to them through narration and commemoration. In other, a chronic trauma (historical fear of persecution) prevented a horrendous event (e.g. Hama Massacre) from transpiring into cultural trauma that marked collective identity beyond its immediate witnesses.

<sup>91</sup> Many anti-revolution intellectuals maintained an authoritative stance (e.g. Adonis) suggesting a possible relationship between epistemic hierarchism and social hierarchism. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Adonis remains popular mostly among those who bow to Assad's authority despite being well aware of the regime's atrocities.

was congruent with the earlier-discussed avoidance of political participation and leadership in the organisations that emerged from the movement.

The lack of ideational influence by democratic secularist intellectuals contributed to an ideological leadership vacuum often perceived, even by participants, as contributory to the movement's failure. Furthermore, their nonparticipation in institutionalised political action after exile, and the perceived failure of the few who did participate, further weakened social trust towards intellectuals.

Burhan Ghalioun was amongst this few. In the following excerpt from our interview, he discussed the interdependency between the aforementioned sides of intellectuals' dual role: ideational influence and political action, or theory and praxis.

It is not necessary for the farmer or the factory worker to read their books, but [they] will see through their actions a presence, activity and expressiveness that can inspire them... In my view, intellectuals should engage with lived reality on a practical level. The intellectual has to be willing to take risks. In order to pay attention to your thoughts, the people must also see your actions. (Burhan Ghalioun, personal communication, 2018)

Ghalioun is suggesting here that political organising is integral to intellectual labour not simply inasmuch as it may impact actual political change, but also inasmuch as an intellectual's credibility, performative power and ultimately influence are strengthened by it. As reflected in Said (1996 [1993], p. 12), a fusion between an intellectual's private and public worlds had to be demonstrated, between an intellectual's 'own history, values, writings and positions as they derive from [their] experiences, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, how these enter into the social world' through their writings and interventions. Such a conception of the intellectual seems particularly pertinent to complex and traumatic political contexts. Indeed, sacrificial praxis such as risking political persecution and imprisonment was one of the most potent sources of symbolic power within the intellectual milieu and among pro-revolution publics<sup>92</sup>. I refer to this specific form of symbolic capital as persecution capital.

Paradoxically, the interdependency between theory and praxis was central to the embedded position. In fact, it was premised upon it. But because the embedded position was paired with exile and its limiting implications, an absence of political acumen following years of politicide in Syria, and distrust towards the political<sup>93</sup> more broadly, it contributed to two complications:

First complication: weak ideational impact

At least in retrospect, many participants believed that intellectuals were unable to provide a discourse that was attuned to the circumstances of protesters facing state

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<sup>92</sup>It's telling that when the risk of political praxis was reduced in exile, many withdrew from it.

<sup>93</sup> The political is understood here as institutionalised political organisations and leaderships.

brutality and terrorism, nor were they able to offer guidance, warnings, or a critical discourse later as pockets within the movement began to adopt a religious and sometimes sectarian discourse. Some argued that, at the discursive level, it was these two failures that allowed the movement's descent into self-destruction. I maintain that these perceived discursive failures are related to a radical version of the imbedded intellectual which resulted in interventions which were politically hollow, critically hesitant, or conciliatory – merely reflective of the perceived consensus within the movement's public opinion. This left the movement without intellectual leadership and made it susceptible to the influence of self-interested local, regional and international forces and their obscurantist discourses. To put it more critically, a 'hermeneutics of skepticism' and the 'ethics of hesitation' it engendered (see Zalloua, 2016) resulted in a discursive vacuum and a form of quietism - certainly not towards political power but an unwillingness to critique or speak up about developments within the movement itself.

### Discursive vacuum

First, let us take a closer look at intellectuals' inability to offer an appealing discourse congruent with the lived reality of regime violence and state terrorism.

The earlier described bond between intellectuals and their fast-expanding publics, which formed in the early months of the uprising, didn't survive the movement's violent turn. Ghalioun believes this is because intellectuals were unprepared for the militarisation of the movement and, as a result, did not know how to react to the regime's violence (personal communication, 2018). Abou Laban (personal communication, 2018) describes how when people first took to the streets, could produce a discourse with which to oppose the regime - the slogans of peaceful change towards democracy. But when the regime resorted to violence, and the movement had to choose between armed resistance or surrender, a new discourse, ideology, or political program beyond sheer denunciations of the regime was lacking. 'I think this is in the background of the idea that the street is ahead of the intellectuals', Abou Laban explains (Personal communication, 2018). Intellectuals failed to fulfil their role, he suggests, because they were unable to produce a viable discourse, a framing upon which the movement could continue to be anchored in a brutally violent context. This failure allowed the regime to take control of the struggle and its grand narrative, ushering both into the jihadist scenario, which enables the politically expedient transference of the movement into the international war on terror agenda.

Yassin al-Haj Saleh also attributes the weakness of the impact of intellectuals and their 'secular opposition' to discursive anaemia.

The traditional secular opposition carries no weight today because it has no distinctive discourse about a post-Assad Syria that surpasses what has been said since the late seventies and throughout the Damascus Spring: political multiplicity, rule-of-law, and citizenship. Focusing on these particular pillars of liberal democracy, leaves important ethnic and religious issues outside the scope of rigorous deliberation. It also neglects the feminist question, problems of decentralised administration in political organisation, and to a great extent the "social issue" (al-Haj Saleh 2017 :d).

In an earlier article, al-Haj Saleh makes the repeatedly suggested link between intellectuals' discursive failure and the rise of militant Islamists very clear. He writes,

We joined the revolution with few new ideas, fewer new politics and fewer still new ideologies. This scarcity is opportune for the Islamists. Modern oppositional Islamism is structurally linked to our failed renewal: politically, culturally and socially. This is a fundamental principle to my mind: Islamists are better placed when our societies fail to create new meanings, values and modes of organisation. (al-Haj Saleh, 2014a)

In our interview, he clarified that when he talks about disappointments with intellectuals of his generation, he refers mainly to 'the failure to introduce a new language, new concepts and terms that constitute a discourse better suited to address today's realities and concerns'<sup>94</sup>.

Furthermore, those who identified with the pacifist and reformist Damascus Spring saw it as the seed of the 2011 movements (e.g. Al-Azm, 2013) and described it as 'the healthiest expression of [Syrians'] discontent' (e.g. Ghalioun, personal communication, 2018). The armament of the uprising was effectively a relegation of their role. Not only did it move the battle from the political and discursive to the material and military, but it also left them seeming irrelevant. Violence was not their language, but they observed unfolding events with expectation, part indignant, part hopeful that the militant movement would rapidly achieve what they were trying to studiously but ineffectively build towards for decades: the transition to a just and democratic political system. In a manner of speaking, they were stunned-silent by what was happening on the ground and by their apparent ineffectualness. When all this bloodshed ultimately failed to change the regime and led to utter destruction, many blamed this failure on the 'derailment' (read Islamist militarisation) of the movement rather than, for example, on the military superiority of its opponent(s) or the current international geopolitical environment. That is to say, while they did not offer discursive solutions, they certainly sought explanations for failure in the symbolic realm.

Thus, when peaceful protestors were faced with live ammunition, arrest, torture and mass killing, intellectuals diverged into three main groups. One chose to be silent vis-à-vis a proposed shift towards militarism and delegated the decision to the protestors. This group eventually reflected an extreme form of embeddedness where intellectuals not only gave up any leadership role but took on the position of followers. Their focus became articulating, representing and often poeticising the 'choice of the people' but rarely informing, suggesting or instructing. Consistent with the critique of the authoritarian intellectual, they echoed the position that the protestors know far better than them and that they should take the back seat. While rationality suggested that armament would carry many risks, including dependence on funders and eventual subservience to their agendas such as Islamisation and sectarianisation (e.g. Chawich, personal communication, 2018), many intellectual found it difficult to ask people to persevere in their pacifism under fire while they were being slaughtered, particularly when speaking from safety in exile. Another group pushed for the radical discourse of violent struggle, with some of its members attempting to

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<sup>94</sup> It is interesting to contrast this with Lila's (2001) complaint against 'politically adventurous thinkers' and for increased 'intellectual modesty and self-scrutiny' (as cited in Auckert in Desch 2016, p. 320).

lobby with defected officers and foreign governments concerning a military intervention<sup>95</sup>. while a smaller third group contributed a self-sceptical narrative which posited exile as a central obstacle to an intellectuals' credibility in local political struggles.

Unfortunately, and I am as implicated as anyone, we are trying to lead a revolution from behind Facebook screens in climate-controlled rooms with a cup of coffee and cigarette in hand. We aren't in touch with anything ... If the intellectual is separated from the people's lived experience, then their intellect is no struggle at all; it is metaphysics. (Daher Ayta, Personal communication, 2018)

Only one of the twenty-nine participants in this study explicitly held on to the role of the enlightening authoritative intellectual. Through this position, he warned against militarism and advised protestors to insist on the initial pacifist approach. Document analysis also shows that others outside this study's sample held a similarly authoritative position. This created a discursive disjuncture between the protestors and these intellectuals, particularly those calling for pacifism from a position of safety, whether home or in exile, and contributed to the quick fall of intellectuals' legitimacy in the popular collective consciousness.

A practical example of this was offered by a participant who was part of an activist group that liaised with protestors from Berlin through its members inside Syria.

We used to write the slogans for the protests. I used to deliver them through a friend by Skype, and from him, they went to the protestors in Homs... One day he told me that they were going to take up arms. I expressed my disapproval. He said, perhaps you don't see what's happening; without weapons, the *Mukhabarat* will continue to do this to us. I told him ... this kind of program will lead to dependency on funders. I was against any form of external funding from the beginning (name withheld for this quote, personal communication, 2018).

The group discontinued its work with the protestors shortly after this exchange, I was told.

While more the outcome of exile than that of the embedded position, the discursive disjuncture between pacifist intellectuals and protestors that this situation created contributed to a wave of anti-intellectual sentiment that rose exponentially in 2012 and 2013. It manifested in harsh and broad-scale criticism towards specific Syrian intellectuals, and in the delegitimisation of the notion of the intellectual. These growing anti-intellectual sentiments were accepted by many intellectuals and manifested in a radically embedded position that fetishises the masses, negates any distinctions between them and intellectuals and refrains from playing the critical thought leadership role which intellectuals have traditionally played in social movements.

Rapidly, the partnership between intellectuals and large numbers of protestors which was forged in the early months of the movement was replaced by a rising role for Islamist organisations who not only offered a discourse that justified violence but also offered weapons and funding with it. In positionist terms, Islamist discourse was better aligned with

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<sup>95</sup> The tensions and complications surrounding this position will be discussed in the conclusion chapter.

the historical conditions of the movement as it was able to 'strike a chord with their potential audience, allowing them to make sense of their current or recent experiences' (Baert, 2015, p. 17). In contrast, the intellectuals' emancipatory, secularist and sometimes pacifist discourse failed to sustain its receptivity in the public-intellectual arena because it could not 'connect with the recent and present experiences of the people' (Ibid). Furthermore, as Baert (2015, p.17) theorised, the loss of credibility that one discourse suffered, in this case, the secularist democratic and civil discourse, meant that its counter-discourse of armed jihadism would spread more effectively both because the former no longer resonated with a large segment of the audience and because its 'carriers' had diminished authority.

Like most other participants, Abou Laban seemed acutely aware of this dynamic but equally helpless to change it. He says in our interview (2018):

While organised Jihadism may have been imported, Syrian society has always been conservative, and in the absence of an alternative narrative that was compatible with the necessity of violence, people adopted the fundamentalist Islamist narrative even if it was foreign... The narratives that intellectuals contributed; the emancipatory discourse against dictatorship and authoritarianism is quite old. In Syria, it goes as far back as the beginning of the rule of Hafez Assad. What was missing when the revolution became armed was a discourse that could counter the violent turn, not simply offer a utopian speech... I was there at the time; all this violence by the regime was debilitating. It required a real act to parallel it. The pacifist narrative couldn't have survived in front of this.

Furthermore, with the vast majority of openly oppositionist intellectuals going into exile after 2013, a paradoxical situation began to be felt. Exile complicated intellectuals' perceived bond with their home publics because it resulted in a relationship in which they felt cognitively closer but experientially more separated from those publics. In other words, while they were firmly committed to a positioning in which the intellectual is fully 'embedded' within society, they were now physically removed from theirs. Yassin al-Haj Saleh explains:

The paradox that the revolution and exile created is that our exodus out of the country made our connection to the living environment weak while producing an immersive environment surrounding the revolution. We have a close tie with this environment, and it will continue to be the object of our intellectual and psychological investment for a long time (Personal communication, 2018).

The implication is that as a result of this experiential disadvantage, exilic intellectuals became dependent on their less privileged compatriots inside the country in thinking and theorising Syria; people amongst whom they no longer lived and whose experiences and circumstances they no longer shared. This further contributed to the emergence of the self-image of *radical embeddedness* in which the intellectual was no longer an equal partner with the public but follower and dependent. The resultant reversed leadership will be the focus of a later section in this chapter. But before we get there, let us continue to explore the relationship between radical embeddedness and weak ideational influence.



## Quietism towards the movement's developments

Having identified the discursive vacuum created by violence as the first factor contributing to weakening intellectuals' ideational impact and having ventured into drawing a two-way connection between the discursive vacuum and radical embeddedness. Next, I shall consider the second discursive failure: quietism towards the movement's perceived derailments.

As discussed in Chapter Three, the critique of political Islam nestled in a position between controversy and taboo, particularly around 2012 with rising sectarianisation within parts of the movement (see also Ismail, 2018; Hajaj, 2019 on the divisive nature of this issue). Several established secularist intellectuals refused to recognise 'any evil creatures aside from it [the regime], until its downfall' (e.g. al-Haj Saleh as cited in Hajaj, 2019) or welcomed the influx of foreign fighters taking up arms against the dictator (e.g. Hadidi, 2012) disregarding the issue that they were foreign-funded Jihadists. While explicit statements of acceptance towards Islamist factions were rare and disappeared quickly after their atrocities became known, silence about Islamisation was a central theme of critical retrospective reflection. One such critic was Hussein Chawich. An example of the authoritative 'enlightener' intellectual, Chawich expressed his belief that 'silence about Islamists, armament, and external funding was detrimental' to the movement and undermined intellectuals' responsibility in 'alerting people to problematic issues' (personal communication, 2018). 'The positive meaning of being an *intellectual* is that one does not cheat the people. One maintains enough distance with reality to allow a clear vision with nothing left unspoken', he told me in our interview, adding that

I think the curse of the Syrian Revolution is the unspoken. The Revolution's intellectuals were silent about how it was developing on the ground. They were utterly silent about the Islamist Salafist component, especially in the beginning. In fact, initially, they denied its existence [...] the intellectual who does not question reality and re-evaluate their positions, who does not try to see a situation as a whole leaving nothing unspoken... is a politician, not an intellectual. With time those intellectuals who joined political organisations amassed more that was unspoken than that which they actually said.

Such omissions, frequently discussed during ethnographic fieldwork, were not seen by their critics simply as blind spots. There was an implication that they intended to protect the emancipatory framing at the beginning of the movement and to affirm an intellectual's pro-revolution, pro-people positioning later on. In other words, they were better aligned with the radically embedded positioning. Because positioning depends on what is left out just as much as it does on what is stated and implied (Baert as cited in Susen and Baert, 2017, p. 29), by becoming markers of a revolutionary position, omissions and denial, particularly vis-à-vis the growing influence of Jihadism on the movement, compromised the critical role of the movement's intellectuals who were often only selectively critical. Denial of a Salafist threat was certainly enhanced by the fact that this was the central tenet of the regime's discourse. But it was also rooted in absolute and uncritical solidarity with 'the people', i.e. a radically embedded position, as the following quote demonstrates.

To claim that the victory of the uprising would bring Islamic Emirates or religious regimes is beyond ignorant: it is to speak on behalf of the regime and volunteer to promote the lies of power. Syria, as a reminder, was a country that elected its first

Christian prime minister, Fares al-Khoury [in 1944]. The leader of the Syrian revolution against French colonialism was The Druze Sultan Pasha al-Atrash, and his deputy in the coastal region was the Alawite Sheikh Saleh al-Ali, and the Kurdish Ibrahim Hanano was the leader of a revolution in Aleppo. In Syria, the first Arab parliamentary experience was born, and women were granted the right to vote for the first time in the Arab world [in 1953]. (Hadidi, 2011)

I am not questioning whether the above prognosis is accurate; it is almost impossible to say. Instead, I intend to observe the conflation of critical concerns towards Islamisation with service to the regime and how this conflation diminished criticality within and towards the movement. Needless to say, critical discourse against the regime and its atrocities continued and intensified. Criticality towards other intellectuals was also growing. However, 'Syrian society', the revolution, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the inflow of Jihadist fighters and complex questions related to religiosity and democratisation were almost completely spared for a very long time. When such issues were later raised, in retrospect and after the peaceful uprising was already crushed, it was much too late for them to influence the course of events. Thus, decades-long censorship and silencing of intellectual critique of Syrian society, politics and economics<sup>96</sup> were replaced after 2011 by a seemingly more voluntary absence of rigorous analyses seeking to explain Syria's decades-long ensnarement in authoritarianism beyond a generalist Fanon-inspired discourses about the transfer of colonial structures and forms of dependency from colonial nations to a native ruling class. This absence is deeply connected with questions of ethicopolitical self-positioning and the 'logic of deferral' (Tansiqiyet Alfenwidahdash, 2019) with its often explicit injunction to focus all critique on the regime and its atrocities until after its anticipated fall (e.g. al-Haj Facebook post on 29 December 2012 cited on p. 86). With hopes for any such fall receding, there seems to be some promise of intellectual critique of Syrian politics and society beyond generalist postcolonial scholarship, which presents an exciting area of inquiry for future work.

### Self-deliberations on ideational impact

I have so far shown how participants believed their impact was weakened either by discursive failures following the violent turn and/or quietism about the movement and

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<sup>96</sup> In 1963, when the Baath Party came to power in Syria, intellectuals who had largely been shaping the political structure since independence were marginalised and silenced. In 1978, Burhan Ghalioun published his book *Statement for Democracy*, announcing a new stage in Syrian intellectuals' movement towards democratic change. However, the subsequent regime crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood, and left-leaning forces of change, sent Syrian intellectuals into a 'kingdom of silence'. This retreat is encapsulated in Saadallah Wannous's message to the Egyptian critic Abla Al-Ruweini: 'I will return to my shell, to my daily life, and my illusions, which I weave alone in my room and among my books, where there seems to be a density to the world, and culture takes on a fateful dimension. Here there is nothing but lies, corruption, and the death of hope. We, the [Syrian] intellectuals, are an authority whose primary concern has been to become effective. We are effectively behind the regime, not opposing it or offering an alternative to it. What a disappointment! What sadness!'

attempted to link these phenomena with a radically embedded positioning. But it is worth surveying some of the participants' own explanations of their weak ideational impact.

Samira Mobaied (Personal communication, 2018) finds that the vulnerability of pacifist discourse was exacerbated by weak articulation of the movement's fundamental tenets. She held that 'inadequacy in articulating the movement's primary objectives of justice, dignity and freedom was one reasons why people started distancing themselves from it'. Without discounting the impact of 'forces which Syrians had very little to do with', she finds it incredulous that people could abandon a revolution which 'carries such broad and universal values'. She dilutes the responsibility of the intellectuals in this by questioning the extent to which they were 'given the space to make an impact' and 'deliver the right message'. 'Was it always the intention to isolate this segment of society that had long been calling for such a movement?' she asks.

For Kawakibi, the decline of intellectuals' influence after the initial phase of the revolution can be traced back to an already weak rapport between intellectuals and the general public. He contends that years of 'distance, estrangement and ignorance about each other' meant that when intellectuals wanted to become embedded within the multitude during the uprising, 'it was too late' (Salam Kawakibi, personal communication, 2018).

Discussions on intellectuals' influence within Syrian society were rife with questions on the use of language and its accessibility to the general public. These discussions reflected a tension between intellectuals who maintained the general public as their primary audience and those esoteric peers who strictly contributed intra-intellectual and often quite impenetrable interventions.

Badreddin Arodaki normalises this tension between generality and expertise by distinguishing two types of intellectuals: those 'who can only be read by other intellectuals' and whose work he terms 'foundational writing', and 'those who popularise knowledge using an accessible style'. His view seems to accept this division of intellectual labour and sees a connection between the two roles. 'There are always mediators who transfer this type of knowledge, even if often without intending to do so'. (Personal communication, 2018). One participant offered an example of this translative role at the level of on-the-ground organising: 'We followed the writings of intellectuals, but sometimes we found the language to be heavy, or the concepts potentially alien to the general public, so we would translate them into something closer and more accessible.' (Anonymous, personal communication, 2018)

To some, this division between esoteric and accessible writers was more problematic. Citing his grandfather, an eminent *Nahda* intellectual, Salam Kawakibi recounts his volunteer educational work at the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan, which yielded ten studentships for refugees from that camp at the École des Hautes Études in Paris. He further explains:

I believe in Gramsci's organic intellectual <sup>97</sup>. An intellectual who is only an intellectual does not concern me; I do not identify with them. If you are an intellectual, if you have a

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<sup>97</sup> Gramsci was equally evoked by esoteric writers such as literary critic and political writer Subhi Hadidi who tells me, 'I don't know if I am an organic intellectual in the Gramscian sense, but I strive to be one.' And yet, he

mastery of ideas, you must use it to reach out. Abdulrahman Al Kawakibi, who is, by the way, my grandfather, wrote *Taba'ey Al-Istibdad* at a time when all other writers were embellishing their writing so much that you needed a dictionary to understand them. He wrote in a simple language. They accused him of butchering the Arabic language. He told them language is a means, not an end. You have to reach the people. This is the role of the intellectual. It doesn't mean that he becomes superficial or banal, but he must reach. Otherwise, there is no use for his intellect. (2018)

A connection was sometimes made between the call for simplification of language and the propensity towards cultural populism with hostility towards cultivated language posited as a manifestation of an anti-intellectualism which demands a language that is simplified 'to the degree of flattening, reading any attempt to analyse or synthesise with some degree of intellectual depth as a worthless elitist act' (Azmeah, personal communication, 2018).

On the issue of impact, Rosa Yaseen-Hassan holds that despite a historical 'schism between them and their society', which she attributes primarily to the nature of intellectual life under dictatorship, 'intellectuals were nevertheless [socially] influential'. She bases this view on a comparative perspective,

I don't think intellectuals in Europe, for example, are more impactful. In Europe, you can say whatever you want, but how impactful are you? To what extent are you able to induce change. In Western democracies, change comes from political action, not through culture. Why, then, should we expect that change should come through cultural and intellectual tools in our society? I think cultural change is an accumulative type of change that is much more important and sustainable than political change. But in a dictatorship like ours, it was very difficult to enact change at any level. (Personal communication, 2018)

Her comparison between the impact of intellectuals in Western democracies and under dictatorship resonates with that of East German writer Stefan Heym's reflections on intellectual life in his country. Heym describes the effect of adverse conditions for exercising intellectual labour as favourable in as much as a writer in the West can write practically anything and 'it doesn't make any difference, nobody gives a damn'. Even though it might be read more widely, raise interest and provide entertainment, 'it has very little political effect'. Whereas in authoritarian countries, 'the writer has more weight; that is why you have censorship, because his word counts and because politicians must take what he writes seriously. Therefore, it is much more fun to work in this so-called socialist part of the world.' (As cited in (Plesu, 1995, p. 62).

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confesses that reading him is a 'burden' and difficult as he is 'unable to write in an accessible style' but instead addresses 'an advanced awareness' which means that 'in one way or another, I am elitist'. To justify this inner incongruence between his Gramscian aspirations and his esoteric style Habibi describes 'a pact with the Syrian reader' by which they accept him as a 'devoted dissident' while he maintains his position 'as a secular democrat'. In other words, the resoluteness of his dissidence justifies his secularist elitism. 'My accountability to my reader is based on these points'. His very success as a writer is measured by both 'the interaction I receive from my readers and the degree to which I am wanted by the regime'.

Similarly, in Western Europe, the stifling of intellectuals by authoritarian regimes was accompanied by a perception that they carried substantial social influence. Baert (2015, p.67) observes how the harsh verdicts against collaborationist writers based on their writings in the French Purge trials (1944-1953) indicate the significance attributed to writing in French society at the time. Desch (2016, p. 27) further suggests that ‘the source of the much-decried decline in public intellectualism might be our democratic politics’ while Helen Small (2002, pp. 10-11) construes declinists approaches to the sociology of intellectuals as a ‘Western cliché informed by a universalistic bias’.

I am not pointing toward a causal relationship between censorship and impact. Of course not. But it may be argued that at least in the intra-intellectual domain, censorship, repression, persecution and prosecution (e.g. the French Purge trials) have had the effect of heightening the perceived impact of intellectuals and sometimes the endorsement of specific authors, artists or books in the public eye. I have referred to the type of capital that paradoxically creates such an impact as persecution capital. In Syria, for example, it was often said that the local equivalent of winning a literary award is getting one’s book banned – and thus transferred from the prosaic repository of books in official circulation to the prestigious repository of books on the black market.

Indeed, during the early phase of the civil uprising, there was an inclination to believe that intellectuals’ opinions mattered even where engagement with their writings was limited. However, literature and fieldwork data suggest that such influence does more in confirming predetermined views than converting or influencing them. As Tetlock suggests, ‘we do not listen to public intellectuals because we think they can reveal to us the truth’; rather, we choose the ones who can ‘bolster our prejudices’ (cited in Desch 2016 p. 20). This proposition is supported by an observation from my interview with Liwaa Yazji (2018), who describes the impact of Adonis and Ziad Rahbani’s anti-revolution positions on those with ambivalent views vis-à-vis the movement, also referred to in Syria as ‘the grey’ *alramadiyn*.

It resulted in ‘the grey’ siding against the revolution. If more support for the revolution was shown by intellectuals, this group would have been embarrassed by a position goes against intellect. Instead, they felt empowered ... there was a sigh of relief: “we were right. We are no longer the dictatorship supporters; we are the intelligent ones because the intelligent have the same position as ours.”

That being said, increasingly with the defeat of the civil democratic current; the earlier discussed rise of violence and political Islamisation; and the transformation of the movement into a proxy war in which the Syrian people had little agency, participants agreed that any influence intellectuals may (or may not) have had on the public, declined very quickly. Many participants talked about having ‘no illusions concerning the impact of writing’ on real life. Perceived impact was now mostly limited to confirming pre-existing positions as suggested above or showing solidarity towards the most victimised of the war’s victims - Syria’s marginalised. For example, Paris-based artist Mohammad Omran disclosed pensively in his under-ground art studio in Ivry-sur-Seine: ‘The work of intellectuals might be giving suffering people a sense of solidarity and perhaps sometimes fostering such solidarity in the rest of the world. But I don’t know what value our work could possibly have in actually impacting change or influencing political decisions’ (personal communication, 2019). While participants did not refer to the transition from contested impact to agreed

lack of impact explicitly, it would be unlikely that their initial engagement with the movement, including the creation of anti-regime interventions at an incredibly high cost to their safety, was not accompanied by some belief in the possibility of impacting political change. In retrospect, they may have construed their participation as ethical or aesthetic. And indeed, I believe it was greatly influenced by the construct of the dissident intellectual as depicted discursively over decades and by the ethics and aesthetics surrounding that persona. However, it is difficult to imagine that, considering the risk they were undertaking, intellectuals already adopted such humble positions vis-à-vis their own impact when they sided with the revolution in 2011.

This section has aimed to show how intellectuals' self-conception as embedded in society and merged with the masses was congruent with the relinquishment of any intellectual leadership responsibilities. Because it was now adopted from exile, radical embeddedness was a chosen self-positioning which diluted intellectuals' responsibility rather than the lived reality it had been in the early phase of the uprising. Many participants recognised the return of an old schism between them and their home society. However, an ideal of embeddedness continued to shape their understanding of their positions, relationship, and role within it. This form of embedded positionality contributed to weakening their ideational impact, which, in turn, affected the course of the movement in multiple ways. In the next section, I will observe how radical embeddedness and epistemic hyper-egalitarianism were also relatable to a limited role for intellectuals in the *political arena*.

#### Second complication: limited political role and a leaderless movement

Based on interview data, only 2 participants were directly involved in political work through oppositional political organisations in exile. They found their peers' retreat from such work as both symptomatic of the aforementioned 're-separation with the people' and contributory to the 'derailment of the movement'. Burhan Ghalioun, who expressed deep disappointment apropos Syrian intellectuals' abstention from organised political work, attributes this to 'arrogance' and suggests that they 'became an insular group whose work is mainly internally directed and disconnected from the people' (Personal communication, 2018). He construes this as a structural characteristic and attributes it to historical conditions in which intellectuals had no political role due to 'the absence of the possibility to lecture, engage the public and tour' arguing that this insular quality continued after exile where 'their public-facing activities were limited and group-based with no expansive dynamic' (Personal communication, 2018). Ghalioun was one of few public intellectuals to become a member of the Syrian National Council, one of two umbrella oppositionist organisations aiming to represent the Syrian people. His decision to take up professional politics was controversial within the milieu, and he was outspoken in our interview about how detrimental to the revolution he found the retreat of his peers to have been. He tells me, 'There was not a single intellectual to be found to stand with me in this role. This is the disaster. I had to work with people who were mostly illiterate and mostly Islamist. Where were the other intellectuals?'. Ghalioun attributes this retreat to an 'orientalist' outlook toward the Arab people which saw them as essentially regressive, religious, intolerant and sectarian; a view he contests unreservedly:

There has not been a revolution in which intellectuals were not engaged, except for the Arab revolutions. This was their chance. Nevertheless, there was a sense that our peoples were as hopeless as they were marginalised. They were seen as a burden that had to be endured. Since the revolutions, this dynamic has been in transition; it is unclear how things will crystallise. The idea that this is a helpless people has been shaken, but at the same time, the idea that if left to their own devices, the people will regress to Islam, intolerance or sectarianism is still present.

Like Ghalioun, Paris-based academic Samira Mobaied believed it was essential that Syrian intellectuals undertake a direct role. 'A leap has been taken, and if we remain at the level of intellectual participation in the struggle, we will remain outside what takes place within political organisations, and this puts us at a disadvantage', she explains. Like Ghalioun, Mobaied has been an active member in oppositionist organisations, including the High Negotiations Committee of the Syrian Opposition and Syrian Christians for Peace.

Most other intellectuals avoided membership in any such organisations<sup>98</sup>. They defended their decision by adherence to the view that saw political loyalties and scholarship's long-cherished element of detachment as necessarily conflicting (for more on this view, see Schaar & Wolin, 1963). Others were more pragmatist in their reasoning. Aligning with a discourse that abandons pretensions of scientific purity or the existence of knowledge for its own sake (e.g. Menand, 2010, p. 13–14), their concern was that in the absence of an oppositional political legacy; parties, alliances and networks that could support them, any such involvement would have been predestined to failure<sup>99</sup>.

If you see any of those intellectuals who joined the [Syrian National] Council, and Sobhi and I share this reasoning in our refusal to become members, they joined as individuals, not as members of a party whereas we would be working in exile with organised people who have financial and political support from entire states. What can we contribute in such a setting? Nothing. Except become a toy in their hands, and that's exactly what happened to them [in reference to intellectuals who joined the Council in a private capacity]. (Farouk Mardam Bey, personal communication, 2018)

However, despite avoidance of political work and scepticism towards intellectuals' role in organised politics, intellectuals, particularly of the middle and older generations, insisted on an Arendtian understanding of political life as integral to the human experience and repeatedly highlighted the importance of ending Syria's 'politicide' and enabling the resurrection of free political action and discourse in Syria. They

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<sup>98</sup> Notable exceptions include, in the Syrian National Council (SNC), Basma Kodmani, a Paris-based Syrian academic and Radwan Ziadeh, a senior fellow at Washington-based think tank, the US Institute of Peace. A notable exception outside the SNC is Aref Dalila, an academic and previous Dean at Damascus University who served on the executive committee of the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change. Neither of them is a participant in this study.

<sup>99</sup> This strategy rests on the Leninist position that political agency requires a party and on the understanding that while visionary hopes rest on the emancipatory potential of a culture of critical discourse, 'it is only through parties that anything political gets done in today's world' (see also Gouldner, 1979). Mardam Bey identifies as Maoist while Hadidi is a member of the Syrian Democratic People's Party, previously named Syrian Communist Party (Political Bureau).

problematised a lack of enthusiasm towards political organising, particularly in exile, sometimes attributing it to a state of generalised despair and a 'conviction that it's all useless' (Farouk Mardam Bey, personal communication, 2018). At the same time, with few exceptions, they refrained from political organising within the movement themselves.

Al-Haj Saleh (2014b), who has remained outside organised political work since his release from prison in 1996, critiques the abstention from political work among the Syrian youth and intellectuals and problematises their 'supposedly devoting themselves instead to issues of thought, literature and art' or to ostensibly nonpartisan NGO work. He attributes overall withdrawal from politics in Syria to a regime-led strategy which has isolated the public from politics by administering a regime of chronic trauma surrounding the political; 'through intimidation, fear, corruption and abuse; or by feeding public scepticism about politics and politicians'. This strategy, he suggests, has resulted in a fraught relationship to politics, variably evoking images of 'power and domination', 'fickleness', 'corruption', and 'elitist detachment from people's lives'. He admits to not being 'outside of this condition which he criticises' and to have repeatedly stated that he works exclusively with cultural, not political tools. He also recognises that in this way, he is 'complicit in limiting the field of politics and hindering its overdue expansion which the revolution has made possible'. Nevertheless, he offers no explanation for his own position outside the organised politics of the movement.

Similarly, Farouk Mardam Bey, who has been living in France since 1965 and remains outside the political organisations of the Syrian revolution, tells me,

The Syrian state wanted politics to end, for people to become disinterested in politics except in the scope of applauding the ruler. But politics is an essential part of life, and it cannot be restricted to the cultural field... political change inside Syria requires political organising. (Farouk Mardam Bey, personal communication, 2018)

In addition to previously cited concerns about external support and party membership, this contradictory position vis-à-vis political engagement may also be linked with what Höslé (2016, p. 375) calls 'the true dilemma of the public intellectual' arguing that alliances are necessary if the public intellectual is to have an impact on the political arena. But joining a platform means making concessions that compromise intellectual independence and sometimes result in self-deception when intellectuals 'come even to believe what at the beginning was only a concession to the would-be ally' (Ibid).

It may be said that this 'true dilemma of the public intellectual' at least partially reflects the experience of Burhan Ghalioun, who in the choice between attempting to influence the movement through intellectual work and making a direct political impact through his leadership of the Syrian National Council, prioritised the latter. Or to borrow from Höslé (2016 p. 376), 'between magnificent loneliness with the dim chance of a long-term impact and immediate effect at the expense of depth', he chose 'immediate effect'. Perhaps inevitably, he ended up making concessions that fundamentally contradicted his general intellectual line, such as aligning with an organisation that has called for the application of shari'a law such as the Muslim Brotherhood, justifying the acceptance of Gulf funding, or resorting to authoritarian leadership strategies, according to several accounts. He did believe that 'intellectual work is meaningful and politically fruitful' but was simultaneously



aware that 'it is long term work' and found it to be a 'selfish' choice in a context like 2011 Syria (Personal communication, 2018). He explains in our interview,

I could have stayed outside and said I am not a politician. I could have written 4 or 5 books throughout this period. But that would have been a betrayal not only to my people but also to my own principles. I have been writing about democracy and mass movements for 40 or 50 years; I cannot stand on the margin when the moment comes, when people finally decide to claim their freedoms. That would have made me contemptible; someone who talks but does not act... Intellectuals are answerable for staying on the margins of the revolution instead of throwing themselves into it so that others don't take the lead and drive the revolution into catastrophe as they did. Why did the Islamists take control? Because the intellectuals didn't. (Personal communication, 2018)

His decision to take a leading political role cannot have been easy; in the end, Ghalioun's performance was widely criticised for being fraught with concessions forced upon him by externally supported parties. As the following interview excerpt indicates, it was by reference to the social script of the revolutionary intellectual that Ghalioun seemed to find reassurance of his decision and defend it against critics.

Knowledge is my profession in the same way that blacksmithing is a smith's job. But when the moment comes, and people take to the streets and open their chests to bullets, I cannot stay outside on the premise that I am an intellectual. I have to take the risk. People used to ask me, aren't you afraid they would kill you? I would answer, I am not better than the others who are taking to the streets. There are moments that cannot be confronted in the same way as ordinary moments. The intellectual is no longer just an intellectual, and the smith no longer merely a smith, and the shoemaker no longer simply a shoemaker, and the teacher no longer only a teacher, when they take to the streets; they are *Syrians* demanding freedom. (Personal communication, 2018)

The egalitarian spirit reflected in this excerpt conceals that Ghalioun did not simply take to the streets like the smith and the butcher but was leading the foremost oppositional organisation in exile. That said, there is no doubt that Ghalioun's involvement in the movement was radically more praxis-driven than that of his peers.

As for the majority of exilic intellectuals, staying outside of the movement's political institutions was substituted by other forms of engagement in which they acted first and foremost as a 'carrier group' in a cultural trauma construction process (on the role of intellectuals as cultural trauma carriers see also Ushiyama & Baert, 2016; Baert, 2015, p. 143; Eyerman, 1994). In this capacity, they operated in the public sphere - not political organisations - and focused on articulating claims, representing interests and desires and trying to uphold the movement's emancipatory framing. Their numbers grew exponentially as the description 'intellectual' no longer referred to a structurally determined group or personality type but to a socially constructed, historically conditioned group of actors mediating between the cultural and political spheres, 'not so much representing and giving voice to their own ideas and interests, but rather articulating ideas to and for others' (Eyerman, 2003, p. 3). This shift towards trauma work, particularly in its tragic form, can be seen as both a cause and a result of the embedded position. It was a *cause* for embeddedness because doing trauma work necessitated identification and compassion with

the suffering masses. And it was a *result* of embeddedness because trauma work came at the expense of their role as critics and leaders of the revolutionary movement.

As we have seen, the controversial nature of intellectuals' involvement in the opposition's political organisations was partially guided by the fact that these organisations were funded by extra-national interests and dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood. This drove many intellectuals to keep a distance from them on the pretext that joining unsupported by a party restricts them to a weak and nominal role. But denunciation of such involvement was also, importantly, influenced by the idea of 'the deliberately leaderless character' of the movement (Glasius & Pleyers, 2013). It is this symbolic factor that seems most connected to the embedded positionality.

'Leaderlessness' was celebrated by many revolutionary intellectuals who explicitly refused leadership roles and denounced iconic positions within the movement. As an example, I cite Yassin al-Haj Saleh's article celebrating a statement by the late activist and actress Fadwa Sulaiman in which she rejects reference to her as an 'icon of the revolutionary Alawite'. Paraphrasing her words Saleh writes: 'Truly amazing: "I'm not an idol! I'm Fadwa! Like life! I have a lover! Down with icons and long live freedom! I'm a rebel!" ... She frames her refusal to become an idol within the broader context of Syrians' movement to tear down all idols!' (al-Haj Saleh, 2011)

This distinctively horizontal outlook, emphasising resistance to hierarchies, both symbolic and epistemic, was certainly aligned with the embedded position which recognises intellectuals and the people as epistemic equals (Baert & Susen, 2017, p. 41). It has been suggested that the Arab revolutions were centred around the idea of building a new social contract whereby law becomes 'an expression of the people's solidarity' rather than the 'sovereignty of any upright or righteous person or group (a charismatic leader)' (Shahin cited in Glasius & Pleyers, 2013, p. 557). Among Syrian intellectuals, who had since the 1990s gradually adopted 'an ethos of ... social embeddedness' (Kassab, 2019. P.115), this horizontal anti-leadership understanding of the movement was particularly pronounced. Rosa Yaseen-Hassan suggests it was a 'revolt against the personification [of movements] and mythologisation [of leaders]' that led Syrians to reject the idea of leadership within the movement. I believe that this perception of anti-leadership sentiments among their publics contributed to intellectuals' inclination toward the embedded position, as if in pre-emption of their impending devaluation within this wave of anti-leadership and ultimately anti-intellectualist sentiments. In this sense, denunciation of leadership can be seen as both cause and symptom of the radically embedded positionality. It also contributed to the rise of anti-intellectualism, as I will shortly argue.

Unsurprisingly, for those engaged in the movement's organisations, its leaderless character was seen as a failing rather than something to celebrate. It created a leadership vacuum that was quickly occupied by reactionary and undemocratic forces discussed earlier. Ghalioun offered one such argument as we have seen. While he is no exception to the tension between egalitarianism and vanguardism within the public intellectual, Ghalioun's egalitarianism does not trump his belief in the intellectual's responsibility. In his reply to a letter blaming intellectuals for legitimising a movement that led to destruction and death, Ghalioun contends that Syrian intellectuals are not to blame for spreading emancipatory ideals and hopes, as his critic had indicated. Instead, they are accountable for failing to

perform a guiding role that might direct the movement towards positive goals and prevent it from falling into the pits of sectarianism and vengefulness toward which the regime was driving it. They are to blame, he says, for 'leaving the people almost entirely leaderless' (Ghalioun, 2018).

It is worth noting that among many of those who initially celebrated the revolution's 'leaderlessness', a sense of regret gradually emerged. It was reflected in a self-questioning that prevailed in the public sphere in the past few years and the repeated call for collective self-reflection and revisions *muaraja'at*. At least partially, this self-reflection had to do with having failed to play a more effective role in preserving the movement's emancipatory framing, i.e. performing an intellectual leadership role. In a group article published on the 8<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the revolution, a group of exiled artists, writers and activists wrote that the greatest lesson of the revolution was that they had overstated the 'logic of deferral' which had them refrain from critiquing reactionary forces within the revolution to maintain a united front until the fall of the regime. 'We did not pay attention to the importance of fighting the battle for personal freedoms early on, before the conservative current – an imperially orientated force of course – led by the Islamist authoritarians was able to sideline us' (Tansiqiyet Alfenwidahdash, 2019). In other words, their greatest regret was that they failed to intervene authoritatively at the right time for fear that their views contravened with anti-leadership sentiments or contradicted those of audiences important in the fight against the regime.

As a final note on the relationship between intellectuals' limited political role and the embedded position, I contend that the combination of engrossment in revolutionary thinking with abstention from applied politics reduced intellectuals to what John McGowan might call 'sentimental radicalism' – an extension of his term 'sentimental socialism' (McGowan, 2016, p. 127). This radicalism is sentimental in that it did not provide a robust intellectual and programmatic description of how political transition will be achieved in Syria, nor a vision of a desired and plausible Syrian society to be aspired for after that transition. This lack of programmatic substance is in no small part attributable to the absence of a clear political ideology that can offer a shared vision of what progress looks like – if socialism was the ideology of intellectuals since the 70s, it is clear that their political ideology today is 'vague at best' (Ibid). But it is also attributable to an epistemically egalitarian position that hindered their willingness to perform intellectual leadership and social critique within the movement.

### Anti-intellectualism and cultural populism

In lieu of political and ideational leadership, an amorphous construct of 'the people' was presented as the hero of the movement influenced by 'the mutual inscription of the subaltern and the popular' whereby the popular as an identity 'enters into the making of subaltern political agency' (Ismail, 2013). For many intellectuals, the focus was now not on educating or emancipating 'the people' but rather on supporting and learning from them.

The importance of appealing to and/or aligning with 'the people' was significantly energised by structural changes in the public sphere enabled by new technologies. In this new public sphere, engaged publics became more potent than ever in determining not only an intellectual's success but also what constitutes a 'successful' intellectual (Baert & Booth,

2012, p. 15). Building on positioning theory, one can then suppose that intellectuals were writing in ways that resonated with the public, connected emotionally with them, and could lead to positive uptake, diffusion and symbolic recognition (Baert, 2015, pp.132-133).

Among pro-movement publics, a positive emotional response was most likely to occur through narratives that aestheticised the collective trauma; honoured the people, their sacrifices, and their suffering; and maintained unconditional solidarity towards them. At least between 2012 and 2014, when a growing Jihadist discourse provided symbolic validation of armed resistance and enabled its material actualisation, generating a positive emotional response with their publics meant that oppositionist intellectuals were to avoid critical interventions concerning the Jihadist framing of the movement. This avoidance can be attributed to at least two reasons. Firstly, Jihadist discourse was the only available discourse that resonated with the revolutionaries' need for defensive violence. And secondly, anti-Jihadist discourse had long been the turf of the regime and its intellectuals and approximating it jeopardised an intellectual's pro-revolution positioning.

I am not suggesting that quietism about the movement's developments among intellectuals during that period was intentional or aimed at maximising their popularity and success. Many factors interacted to produce this phenomenon, not least among which was the shock which left intellectuals bewildered as they struggled to capture symbolic forces with which to face the unfolding tragedy. Abandoning a language of intentions for a logic of effect (Baert, 2015), I am suggesting, however, that avoiding misalignment with the movement's Islamist component during that time can be seen as a reflection of the primacy of intellectuals' growing tendency to defer judgement and leadership to 'the people'.

Thus, a form of anti-intellectual populism began to emerge, heightened by blame directed at intellectuals for the state of affairs to which the revolution they encouraged but failed to guide had led. Populism 'sha'bawiya' in this context refers to a type of *cultural fetishism of the masses* rather than a political program or approach. This fetishism is accompanied by gravitation towards views that minimise disagreement with the popular majority and avoidance of controversial matters. It entails a desire to appeal to 'ordinary people' including by using simple language and popular cultural references. More problematically, it construes 'the people' as a monolithic and distinct entity, attributes certain traits to it and supports it uncritically and unconditionally.

In this narrative, intellectuals are held responsible for the destruction caused by the failure of the revolution. The following excerpt from a letter addressed to Burhan Ghalioun illustrates this. After blaming intellectuals for the 'destruction, killing and displacement' which the revolution brought, the letter explains:

At first, you [intellectuals] inspired hope and made us dream of a developed, modern, and secular Syria. People like you who have entered people's hearts and minds using their refined personalities have motivated them to reject the regime. But the way I see it, it would have been better for all of us if things had remained the same. You did not understand the Syrian people and could not see how steeped they are in the ignorance of religiosity, blind intolerance, tribal and sectarian belongings, and by misreading the people, you brought the country and the people to the abyss (cited in Ghalioun, 2018).

Many of the participants in this study were vigilant about the inclination toward anti-intellectual populism. Even when they critiqued other individual intellectuals, groups of intellectuals, or 'Syrian intellectuals' as such, they continued to express vigilance about anti-intellectualism.

A case in point is Yassin al-Haj Saleh, who, having criticised intellectuals on various occasions, remained vigilant concerning blanket anti-intellectualism.

I notice that there persists a populist discourse against intellectuals, even among intellectuals. I find that very unfortunate... It may have always been present, but it wasn't as visible, nor was it as openly expressed as it is now after the revolution. It could be attributable to the emergence of social media, which enabled large segments of society, hundreds of thousands, to enter into the field of public affairs. (Personal communication, 2018)

Participants also suggested that anti-intellectualism had deeper roots and was entangled with Baathist rule and its problematic relationship to culture. Liwaa Yazji (Personal communication, 2018) explains that intellectualism has long been a delicate topic in the militarised society under Baath party rule. She suggests that a pretence of intellectualism and an appropriation of culture operated in tandem with contempt for them as bourgeois constructs. A systematic trivialisation of intellectualism went hand in hand with its pretence, Yazji explains. As a secular party, the Baath wanted to monopolise culture. But as a rural marginalised minority, Assad's Alawite sect nursed deep resentment towards intellectuals as traditionally urban middle-class. This resentment came from the knowledge that 'they can never fully own it [culture]' because, as Yazji suggests, 'the deeper your knowledge, the more inevitable it will become that you will take a stance against the Baath party'. Similarly, Mobaied says, 'we must confess that the stereotyping of intellectuals, academics and researchers by the regime has succeeded in rupturing the connection between this group and the rest of society and misshaping their image and derailing their mission for decades to come.' (Mobaied, 2018)

Azmeh distinguishes anti-intellectualism as a generalised sentiment from the construction of intellectuals as 'traitors'. He contends that generalised animosity towards intellectualism is prevalent among intellectuals themselves. It manifested in an environment where '*tanzeer*' or theorising became an offence, and attempts at even the most slightly complex analysis or synthesis were dismissed as pretentious elitist performances. He contrasts these anti-intellectual sentiments among intellectuals with the public's 'largely positive views of culture and of intellectuals' from whom they 'wish to learn', and to whom they 'have a thirst to listen- contrary to what the populist intellectuals claim' (Personal communication, 2018). He differentiates, however, between this type of intellectual anti-intellectualism and the construction of intellectuals as traitors. He describes this latter construction as a 'reaction to positions like those of Adonis and a past in which many intellectuals colluded with the regime, performing progressive leftism but in effect no more than silent witnesses to its atrocities'. It is the former type of anti-intellectual populism, Azmeh concludes, that weakened the influence of intellectual interventions concerning the movement and limited their reach and impact. He contends that this dynamic was largely responsible for the absence of intellectual leadership for the movement and the lack of a clear working programme beyond the general demand of bringing down the dictatorship which was put

forth by the protestors. What was missing was a 'compass or perhaps several compasses; ... a multiplicity in which different currents might interact with each other and offer a sense of deliberated direction', he adds. For Azmeh, anti-intellectualism's prevalence seemed highest within a circle of intellectuals whom the regime had co-opted but who later sided with the revolution. 'They were part of an intellectual body which the regime patronaged to some extent, regularly persecuting radical voices whenever they emerged from it' (personal communication, 2018). The implication is that intellectuals' anti-intellectualism was often an act of retroactive atonement with past guilt, a rejection of an identity now deemed complicit with the regime. This is a topic I will briefly return to later in this chapter. Here I only wish to highlight how these quotes themselves reveal a fetishism of the masses that constructs them as a single entity with a homogenous position towards intellectuals exempt from accusations of anti-intellectualism. Even for anti-anti-intellectualists, anti-intellectualism was the weakness of intellectuals, not 'the people'.

Indeed, as some participants observed, anti-intellectualism transposed past culturalist critique of Syrian society or Arab culture into its opposite: a type of fetishism of the masses. Sulafa Hijazi describes this transposition,

There was an arrogant cultural elitism that manifested in contempt towards the masses and a view that "these people do not represent me; they are reactionary". The revolution reversed all this. Elitist ideas became unethical, and everything popular became the new elite. It is an elitisation [sic] of the street, a romanticisation of the masses. For example, some of my friends who only socialise within the milieu of elite art festival directors boast about being best buddies with Abu Mohammad, the handyman. (Personal communication, 2018)

Similarly, Salam Kawakibi describes how 'Syrian intellectuals went straight from elitism to populism'. While before 2011, they refused to write in accessible language, engage with the masses or believe that the people are capable of instigating change, after 2011, 'they realised that this multitude was going to move forward with or without them'. It was then that they realised they had underestimated them, and many rushed to join their movement. Kawakibi believes that when they tried to take the lead, it was too late because 'they were completely ignorant about this people' so instead of playing a meaningful role, 'they started to transform their discourse from a complicated esoteric one to a populist one' which is 'inflammatory, over-simplistic, and nebulous'. (Personal communication, 2018).

Samira Moubayed speaks critically of populism among intellectuals, pointing out that it is most noticeable 'among older intellectuals, especially those imprisoned for a long time'. She attributes it to a dependence on the masses, which creates a vital connection whereby intellectuals are so committed to protecting this relationship that they always side with and are always influenced by the tendencies of the masses no matter what course they might take 'even if it was in the wrong direction'. Moubayed attributes this inclination to 'follow' rather than lead to an 'organic relationship with the masses which makes the intellectual's very existence dependent on it'. Moubayed suggests that their concern is that 'If they disagreed with the popular opinion, they might lose some of their popularity which is very important to them. Thus, they somewhat internalise popular views and are influenced by the street.' (Personal communication, 2018)

Methodologically, participants' recognition of populist anti-intellectualism within the milieu is not sufficient for accepting the existence of any such sentiment. However, combined with statements by participants which were explicit performances of epistemic egalitarianism and with a rejection of intellectual leadership and of any distinction between intellectuals and their publics, one may conclude that a horizontal relationality with home society was consistently performed. It manifested in adherence to perceived public sentiment so strong that it persisted even when such sentiment was directed against intellectuals themselves in the form of populist anti-intellectualism.

## Reversed leadership

The combination of populist fetishism of the masses, anti-intellectualism together with an abstention from political work and a weak ideational influence led to a situation where any previous understanding of intellectuals as 'enlighteners' or social leaders was not only negated but, at least temporarily, reversed. Not dissimilar to post-'68 Paris, *mutatis mutandis*, intellectuals in post-2011 Damascus, 'discovered that the masses no longer need [them] to gain knowledge'; that 'they know far better' than them what is to be done (Foucault, 1977, p. 207) or as the name of the intellectual-activist collective has it 'The Syrian People Know Their Way' *alshaeb alsuri 'arif tariqoh*.

For decades, politically engaged Syrian intellectuals had been imprisoned or exiled. Those who remained had to let go of their self-understanding as agents of change, a notion which has its pedigree in the persona of the *intellectuel engagé* willing to take risks and act heroically in the face of adversity (Baert, 2015, p. 147). Following brutal repression and persecution in the 70s and 80s, most had given up on any hopes for the possibility of social and political revolution in the region and instead adopted a more individualistic and theoretical understanding of their role (Yaseen-Hassan, 2018, pp. 372-373). Consequently, in 2011, they were blindsided by the revolution. Even if they believed they had some accumulative invisible role building towards it (e.g. Ghalioun, 2018; Al-Azm, 2013), when it erupted, they felt that it had 'no connection to them whatsoever' (Yaseen-Hassan, 2018, p. 373). As many of them were trying to attach themselves to the revolution, they did so with belief that 'total acquiescence to the will of the street was their obligation, a duty to abdicate their timeworn roles as critics and iconoclasts' (Ibid). Seemingly inferior to the people, in courage and change leadership, many abandoned the idea of the enlightening responsibility of intellectuals as carriers of a revolutionary conscience. They replaced it with humility in front of the people's courage and suffering and duty of absolute solidarity with 'the people' as reflected in the following quote,

The bet was never on the intellectuals. It has always been on the people .... It was the "illiterate" and "ignorant" people who broke the deadlock. We must recognise that we, the intellectuals and the social elites in general, have lost our battle against tyranny over the past decades. This prompted the people to move, to throw themselves into the fire of revolution. It was the ordinary people who mapped the pathway to freedom, and the intellectual now carries the tremendous burden and responsibility of paving it, enlightening them and guiding them with vision into the future. But as far as I can tell, the intellectuals seem more lost than ordinary people, and in the past eight years, they have missed the opportunity to be up to the

challenge of supporting the people's struggle. (Burhan Ghalioun, personal communication, 2018)

The reversed leadership roles are similarly reflected in the view that 'the Arab revolutions have made clear, at the most obvious level, that culture is essentially something that the people create and the intellectual is at best able to comprehend, articulate and supplement' (Azmeah, personal communication, 2018).

Hadidi takes this solidarity from below to be intrinsic to the legacy of Syrian intellectualism. Contrasting them with Egypt and Tunisia, he contends that Syrian intellectuals' brief history of political engagement 'during the democratic phase following decolonisation and preceding Baath rule'<sup>100</sup> resulted in a situation where 'intellectuals did not traditionally hold a patronising attitude towards the people but tried to be either equal to or even subordinate to the masses.' As a result, Hadidi suggests, 'they did not assume for themselves any leadership status'. This, we are told, presents a 'delightful paradox' within Syria's politico-intellectual history, one in which the prophetic intellectual as an ideal was mostly present among Baathists and Syrian Nationalists, while intellectuals working in direct politics, or trade union organisations, were not in the least prophetic. They were, Hadidi emphasises, primarily collective intellectuals in the sense that they were closely connected to the people 'at the grassroots level, the butcher, the carpenter and taxi driver etc.'. They were also collective in the sense that 'their knowledge production processes were dialogical, and their belonging was communal' even when they came from titled families, he says, offering the case of Jamal Al-Atassi as an example. He presents contemporary intellectuals as a continuation of this tradition, contending that after being released from prison in the early phase of Assad-the-son's presidency, most of these intellectuals were given a margin of freedom to write, publish and be intellectually and politically active inside Syria as the regime avoided a crackdown in its attempt to characterise the young president's era as one of manoeuvring and reform. 'This gave intellectuals a chance to crystallise a sophisticated relationality vis-à-vis the people, one which was neither condescending nor patronising'. (Personal communication, 2018)

I would here emphasise the comparative approach in Hadidi's assessment. The claimed egalitarianism may hold some truth compared to regional examples, as Hadidi suggests in the framing of his argument. The comparison with Egypt resonates with Suzanne Kassab's (2019) comparison between the Egyptian and Syrian intellectual debates from the 1990s to the eve of revolution in 2010. But it can certainly be qualified in the case of Syria by three observations. Firstly, tensions persist within the intellectual between hierarchy and equality, as discussed earlier in this chapter, which are probably as chronic as they are unresolved. Secondly, I would like to emphasise an egalitarianist turn since 2011, which Hadidi himself alludes to when he observes that exilic intellectuals had now acquired 'an intense sense of awe towards the people's potent energy' (personal communication, 2018). And thirdly,

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<sup>100</sup> This period extends just over two decades (from 1946 to 1970) whilst Syrian intellectuals have been operating under and being shaped by the Assadist dictatorship for almost five decades now.



despite this egalitarian turn, there persists some level of hierarchism<sup>101</sup> even amongst the most egalitarian participants. Indeed, interview data indicates that in effect, to varying degrees, even when hierarchy was theoretically rejected, it often revealed paternalism and occasional expressions of superiority towards the general populace. This paternalism may be understood as the fruit of decades of ‘politically manufactured’ (al-Haj Saleh) ‘alienation from the masses’ (Ghalioun), and of ‘confinement to a theoretical cage’ exacerbated by a global wave of postmodernist detachment, all of which resulted in the type of ignorance and misunderstanding of ‘the people’ (Yaseen-Hassan, 2018, pp. 372-373) that bred orientalist culturalism among Arab intellectuals. Such culturalism and its accompanying Orientalism-influenced (mis)understandings of home society will be the focus of the next section.

### Culturalism: between Orientalist contempt and a constructive social critique

Hierarchism within the Syrian intellectual milieu is entangled with culturalism *thaqafawiya*, here understood as the tendency to ‘explain society and politics through culture understood as the people’s “mentality” or “outlook”, while concealing the empirical political circumstances and the majority’s socioeconomic conditions, leaning instead toward construing those as outcomes of that very outlook or mentality’ (al-Haj Saleh, 2016b, p. 10).

Yassin al-Haj Saleh, who dedicated a significant part of his book *Culture as Politics* (2016b) to constructing an in-depth critique of culturalism among Syrian intellectuals, offers the following overview in our interview,

If we trace discourse about public affairs in Syria from the beginning of this century to this day, we will find that culturalism has been on the rise... It is part of a global phenomenon associated with the end of the cold war and the escalation of ‘clash of civilisations’ narratives... So, culturalism and its stars in Syria ... had an audience and were able to bask in the glory of Western appreciation. Then the Arab revolutions brought with them a decline in culturalist discourse. It became clear that it is not that our mentality is defective. Here are the masses bravely starting a revolution, campaigning and protesting. But with the Islamist turn, culturalism made a comeback around 2013 and 2014’ (Yassin al-Haj Saleh, personal communication, 2018).

Saleh is concerned that culturalism is ‘not only a theory that leads to right-wing conclusions but that there is also something malicious, even sectarian, about it’ (Personal communication, 2018). Chawich associates culturalism with racism, suggesting that it has replaced the latter by substituting geneticist explanations with cultural ones to avoid political incorrectness (Personal communication, 20218). Indeed, culturalism became synonymous with internalised Orientalism, construed as cultural condescension directed towards a monolithic conception of the people as ‘dead’, ‘reactionary’ or ‘irrational’.

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<sup>101</sup> Adonis in Paris would be considered more aligned with the first stream, and although he did not agree to participate in the study, I will draw later on examples from his press interviews to illustrate the contrast.

Challenged to assess their own potential Orientalist prejudice, Berlin-based Hussein Chawich and Fares Al-Bahra<sup>102</sup>, both psychiatrists by training recognised the level of vigilance necessary to avoid internalised Orientalism as a source of contempt for the people. Bahra tells me he has come to accept an Orientalist influence or streak as part of his acceptance of human contradictions. Pointing to the importance of cultivating an awareness of any such influence and of maintaining dialogue with it, he says

I know it is there, but it does not translate into practice because it is in dialogue with its opposite. You have to be unaware of it for it to surface in your writing. Unless, of course, you are someone like Adonis, for whom arrogance is a discourse and a position. His discourse is very similar to the European right-wing; they love him, they give him awards (Fares Al Bahra, personal communication, 2018).

Chawich, who maintains a position an authoritative intellectual, suggests that ‘the Orientalist position is one of hegemonic domination and as such, the intellectual must be extremely reflexive and self-critical to evade it’. Deeming it a ‘natural position’ as a product of an intrinsic human ‘desire for domination and power’, he suggests it is magnified in the case of ‘an intellectual addressing ordinary people’. While, like Azmeh, he believes an awareness of the need to resist this tendency is widespread within the cognitive field of diasporic intellectuals, he also thinks it continues to be a widespread position both inside and outside Syria. However, he hastens to add that resisting this hierarchical tendency ‘does not mean that the intellectual should give up their enlightenment role... enlightenment in the sense of the critique of religion, the cultivation of principles towards freedoms, individualism and the possibility for the self to rebel against social forces’. This language carries resemblances to the discourse of the ‘Mission Civilisatrice’ which French officials often drew upon to justify their colonial control in Syria (1922-1946) and elsewhere<sup>103</sup>. When adopted by postcolonial intellectuals, it was accepted as part of their enlightenment or progressivist mission.

Elsewhere in the Arab World, a large body of anti-*Nahda* literature sees this ‘enlightenment mission’ of the Arab intellectual as a colonially motivated project with a hegemonic agenda. It suggests that an intellectual Muslim modernising and reformist movement was cut short by the rise of nationalism inspired by Western liberal secular thought and the doctrines of the French Revolution. (e.g. Moussalli, 2016; Halabi, 2018). But as I have argued elsewhere in this dissertation, this discourse was not popular amongst most Syrian exiled intellectuals. They rejected both Islam-demonising self-critique tainted with an internalised Orientalism *as well as* the idea that modernity is a colonial project that ought to be resisted or that Arab cultures can be reduced to their religious heritage and as such cast outside the trajectory of progress and ‘exiled from history’ to use al-Haj Saleh’s expression. In this approach, they

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<sup>102</sup> Born in Damascus in 1971, Fares Al Bahra is a psychiatrist, poet and columnist. He has been living in Germany since 2005, where he completed his studies. He has published two poetry collections and one in print, and several articles in periodicals and political and current affairs websites. He is a participant in this study.

approximate Moroccan philosopher, literary author and sociologist Abdelkebir Khatibi's theory of double critique (Khatibi, 1985) which adopts a position of 'critical liminality' toward both Orientalist Eurocentricity *and* localist ethnocentricity. Since the late 1980's, intellectuals in the region had to turn their attention to multiple fronts domestically and internationally: militant Islamists, corrupt regimes, infranational communal forces as well as foreign interventions that could not be neatly mapped into the anti-imperialist binary matrix. Fadi Baradwil (2020, p. 169) traces this matrix to diasporic intellectuals like Talal Asad and Edward Said, who developed their anti-imperialist critique while domestic nationalist, secular and equally anti-imperialist forces were being sidelined by authoritarian regimes, communal forces, Israeli invasions (e.g. of Lebanon 1978, 1982, 1986), and militant Islamists who 'took from them the anti-imperialist mantle.'

In order to situate themselves outside what Bardawil describes as the 'moral and political bankruptcy' of the type of anti-imperialist discourse which denied the Syrian revolution its solidarity on the basis of geopolitical support of a 'progressive' and 'anti-imperialist' regime (Ibid), and in order to begin to imagine a cultural identity in which emancipatory values are not reducible to Eurocentricity, many participants situated progressive values within Syrian history and identity by invoking epistemes as dispersed as the post-independence 'golden era' of multi-party progressivism and democratic features of political life in ancient Mesopotamia. I venture into this proposition with some empirical basis and much appreciation that further and more focused investigation would be necessary to suggest a historicization of democracy in the region in ways that construct national identity outside of the Western enlightenment versus Islamic heritage binary.

Syrian intellectuals have long known, al-Haj Saleh intones, that there are three independence struggles for them to face: colonialism, post-independence dictatorships and religiosity or what he ambiguates by terming 'the heavens' (al-Haj Saleh, 2014d). Saleh insists, however, that the three modes of independence are needed *simultaneously*, not *sequentially*, and that while this has proven to be politically impossible, nothing prevents it in the domain of intellectual struggle highlighting an opportunity for a radical rethinking of the state of the world today and our position in it through such an undertaking. By exposing the 'monstrosity of the *mumana'a*' (anti-imperialist support for Assad); the 'authoritarianism of political Islam'; and the 'self-centredness of Modernity', the revolution, we are told, has provided the conditions for a new emancipatory critical discourse that breaks with modes of thinking grounded in a totalising view of history or illusions about the availability of readymade solutions whether in the Islamic past or the history of the Western Other. Saleh suggests that such a discourse, is now possible because the models of religious state-rule that the conflict has engendered, their criminal record and the kind of resistance they have provoked will delegitimise the Islamist solution. It is in this sense that Saleh sees an opportunity to push forward the critique of religious thought, which had met societal and institutional resistance in the 70s when it began but which now seems poised for broader societal acceptance. Similarly, Saleh sees an opportunity to reassess the elitism of past critique, which reflected a 'Western-centricity' or a foreclosed view of history that suspends innovation beyond what is rooted in Western thought. This anti-hegemonic turn, already established in many post-colonial societies, Saleh reminds, affords Western thinkers themselves a vital space of independent thinking and a distance from canonical legacies.

Nothing stands between Syrian intellectuals and their participation in such emancipatory discourse, Saleh claims, except surrender to binary logics of polarisation.

Critical liminality is also demonstrated in participants' attitude toward culturalism and its orientalist undertones. As already discussed, participants were critical of ethnocentric and Islamist discourses which reject liberalist, humanist and progressivist ideals as foreign or colonial. At the same time, the taboo of critiquing Islam had repeatedly been transgressed, perhaps starting with Sadiq Jalal Al-Azm's *Critique of Religious Thought* (1969), for which he was arrested in 1970. More broadly, the attribution of social suffering to cultural causes was acceptable. In fact, many of the participants who problematised culturalism in our interviews had practised it in their earlier writings, particularly before 2011. However, it was precisely the use of such critique to justify 'fascist', pro-regime or 'anti-people' positions that was opposed. Culturalism was particularly rejected when used as a pretext for siding against the revolution by claiming that regime change is pointless until a cultural change is achieved. The implication that the source of social suffering was not the political elite but the masses and their regressive mentality for which culture (mainly understood as Islam) is responsible became taboo. It was specifically this form of culturalism that was rejected.

Sobhi Hadidi, for example, finds culturalist explanations to be expectable in a context like Syria, where they are a 'natural result of complexity'. He says, 'What happened [in Syria] was a social, political and quintessentially cultural event that was also deeply tragic ... An event of this nature will naturally invite culturalist explanations.' What he does problematise, however, is the 'reductionism or forethought' used in culturalist thinking of the type that tries 'to justify a pre-existing position against the movement'. He offers the positions of pro-regime intellectuals as examples; 'There is a difference between [someone] saying, the Arabs' calamity is a cultural one (and this is a very generic proposition which could be partially true but is nevertheless culturalist) and between saying "the fact that protesters gathered in mosques means this is not a revolution". The latter is not just a culturalist position; it is also a political stance that robs society of a dynamic that is specific to it [the viability of using mosques as a gathering point for protestors]' (Personal communication, 2018).

Indeed, with time, overtly culturalist explanations of the Syrian predicament came to be seen as the symbolic demarcation that distinguished pro-movement from anti-movement intellectuals. As such, attributing social and political grievances to negative qualities within Syrian culture, society or 'the people' became somewhat taboo among the pro-revolution intellectuals as it threatened the solidity of their political positioning. Samira Moubayed suggests that 'belief in the people was the differentiating point between regime intellectuals and revolutionary intellectuals'. She distinguishes two poles: one in which intellectuals expressed solidarity and faith in Syrians' ability to 'get back on the trajectory of progress'; and another which 'cast doubt on the Syrian people, their identity, their compass and their ability to achieve progress for their country without being directed by a repressive authority.' This latter view, she contends, had enabled tyrants to control and oppress millions of citizens for decades with hardly any resistance. But it also exposed its proponents as 'regime intellectuals', which, she holds, is perhaps one of 'the revolution's best achievements'. (Mobaied, 2018)

Thus, dissident intellectuals drew symbolic boundaries around their belief in and respect for ‘the people’ to differentiate themselves from the elites. One of the manifestations of such boundaries was a ‘great scorn towards concepts like “the rabble (*alruaea*)” or “the mob”.’ (Azmeah, 2018, personal communication)

While it would be ambitious to neatly map intellectuals’ positioning vis-à-vis the revolution with their culturalist tendencies<sup>104</sup> or their relationality with home society more broadly, the two poles of fetishism versus contempt towards ‘the people’ broadly corresponded to the degree of support intellectuals showed for the movement. Ghalioun refers to the link between culturalism and the anti-revolution positioning in less than ambiguous terms in the following excerpt from our interview,

Some intellectuals genuinely believe that Muslim majority countries have conservative populations with little potential, and so the wager is not on the people but on the ruling elite. Deep down, they are closer to their regimes, not in any direct sense but in their understanding of the people, even if they oppose their regimes. They think that such a people cannot be a force of liberation and that the only liberation forces are themselves and the regimes. (2018)

Examples of the structuralist-egalitarian narrative are ample in this study since most participants adopted a pro-revolution position by virtue of the exilic precondition. But to appraise the culturalist-enlightener position, it may be best to bring examples from one of Syria’s most prominent intellectuals Adonis<sup>105</sup>, who also lives in Paris.

Adonis’s culturalism approaches essentialism when he says, ‘[n]ever will there be democracy in the Arab world. It is against its *essence* (emphasis added).’ (Adonis, 2014). Rather than assign responsibility to the regime’s ‘military solution’ as the cause of the country’s destruction, Adonis attributes responsibility for destruction to the ‘so-called revolution’, describing it as a ‘savage act’.

Another example of essentialist insinuations in Adonis’s culturalism reflecting the argument that Arabs have an intrinsically anti-democratic essence is offered in the following excerpt: ‘The free individual, master of his fate, hasn’t yet been born in Arab or Muslim culture. It’s very complicated. If we don’t understand the cultural problem in the Arab countries, we can’t understand Arab people or politics’. (Adonis, 2014)

In this position, Adonis seems to approximate what Said describes as a trend among some Third World intellectuals who use Orientalist formulae to posit Third World problems as ‘self-inflicted wounds’ (Said, 1986, pp. 53-54; see also Bardawil, 2016, pp. 9-12 and (Brahimi, 2019). In alignment with the way in which most participants understood Adonis, Said holds this group of intellectual elites as complicit in the postcolonial security state (1986, p. 60). Said observes that two salient characteristics mark intellectuals of this persuasion. Firstly,

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<sup>104</sup> For example, George Tarabishi and Adonis occupy different positions vis-à-vis the movement, but both are recognised as orientalist/culturalist in their relationality towards their domestic publics.

<sup>105</sup> Adonis declined to be interviewed for this study.

they present themselves as members of a courageous minority in the Third World, but they are not interested at all in the Third World nor do they address it in their writings. Instead, they wish to appease the 'metropolitan intellectuals' whose approval they 'seem quite desperate to have'. Secondly, what is seen as crucially informative and telling about their work on, for example, the Arab predicament, is precisely what is weakest about it in that it is 'ignorant, illiterate, and cliché-ridden'.

The positioning that Said describes is not very different from what the Syrian public sphere has referred to as 'culturalism', nor from what I have interchangeably labelled here as internalised Orientalism in as much as they all adopt a disapproving and essentialising gaze towards the general population of their countries and are structured upon a high degree of epistemic arrogance. One participant suggested that it is a positioning that would 'fall under the mandate that to be an intellectual you must be different, and sometimes that difference manifested as Orientalist arrogance towards the people'. (Anonymous participant, Berlin, 2018). When directed to a Western audience, as it often is, this positioning also entails an appeal to a Western sense of cultural superiority.

Among the study participants, this positioning was cited and critiqued in others much more than it was revealed in interviews or writings. And yet, perhaps overestimating its prevalence among his peers or implying that it is inadvertently present, Burhan Ghalioun suggests that 'the problem of Syrian intellectuals is the problem of the Syrian bourgeoisie and elite classes: they harbour contempt for the people, so they don't bargain on them.' (Personal communication, 2018).

Indeed, while culturalism was shunned among pro-revolution intellectuals and sometimes replaced by an anti-intellectual populism, there was an abundance of culturalist explanations in diagnosing the failures of the movement itself. This was unsurprisingly more evident through interviews than through document analysis and was evident even among its critics.

Burhan Ghalioun, for example, explained to me his views on the ethical and legal transgressions within the movement using attributions related to local culture. He said,

Cheating and dishonesty were historically present. Our culture is a religious one; it lacks an education of the consciousness. It lacks reasoning through consciousness regardless of what the religious script dictates. Of course, there is a middle class that has developed such reasoning but what I am trying to say is that transgressions in this context become easy. (Burhan Ghalioun, personal communication, 2018)

In another instance, Ghalioun explains the inner struggles within the movement, a distinctive characteristic common to all social movements, by suggesting they are related to Syrian culture.

It is a characteristic of Syrian culture where high interpersonal sensitivity is prevalent because of the absence of objective and critical thinking. People are accustomed to accusing and insulting each other (personal communication, 2018).

Similarly, in discussing communication dynamics in political organising within the movement, Salam Kawakibi links stagnation with a tendency among 'Arabs' to 'hog the conversation' and 'repeat themselves'.

When they are invited to ask a question to a speaker, they end up giving their own lecture. My objective is to teach them to speak only for as long as they are invited to, whether it's 5 minutes, 2 minutes or an hour. We tend to keep going, synonymising and repeating. (Personal communication, 2018)

Badreddin Arodaki implies in our interview that the tendency towards absolutism is intrinsic to Arabs' very language. When I inquire about his opinion on a peer's appeal that intellectuals must make their positions against tyranny explicit, he tells me,

I am very much against this "must" ... The Arabic language does not comprise a conditional tense like the French language. In this tense, there is always room for uncertainty. In Arabic, you have to either affirm or negate... The conditional tense in French is a tense that offers a margin of freedom and humility. You do not own the truth. Everything you say, even that which has been proven by thousands of experiments, could be disproven by one more... There is no philosopher, researcher or writer in France who writes in absolute terms, I notice this as a translator. (Personal communication, 2018)

Explaining the movement's weaknesses by culture, mentality or language while waging war on the 'culturalist intellectuals' of the regime reveals a contradictory stance towards 'culturalism'-- yet another tension within the public intellectual; between culturalism and universalism. See also (Baert & Booth, 2012).

When addressed explicitly, culturalism was problematised, particularly when used as a pretext to side against the movement. An animosity towards culturalism was also the basis of quietism vis-à-vis Islamisation within the movement. And yet, in many instances, clearly culturalist interpretations were offered to explain its failures revealing a complex relationship with home societies that ascribes negative attributions to mentality, religion, language or culture. Faith in the people, even for the most enthusiastic egalitarianists, was never absolute. But it was still always possible to make out the overall positioning of an intellectual vis-à-vis the revolution by examining their position concerning their home culture and society. That said, the assessment of society's progressive and democratic potential- in terms of beliefs, values, abilities and aspirations - was never based on factual conviction. Assessment of such potential is difficult in any society let alone one in which independent empirical studies, opinion polls, development reports, or other forms of rigorous social research was absent for decades. Such studies have been almost impossible to conduct under 5-decades of totalitarian rule, leaving Syria out of the academic spotlight with as little as 114 studies published from 1919 to 2007 (for more on the dearth of research in Syrian Higher Education, see Dillabough et al. 2018). Intellectuals positions on Syria have therefore centred mostly on ideology, social identity or other factors, rather than on information and independent research.

Emphasising the importance of such research for the country's future, Samira Mobaied writes,

Throughout the Assad era, it was forbidden for any Syrian lecturer whom the government had sponsored to study abroad to research Syria... hundreds of dissertations could have served the country in a scientific method, but not under the shadow of a regime that despises the country and its people. Let us work towards a different future. (Facebook post, 19 October 2019)

In the absence of any basis for assessing the democratic potential of society, all diagnoses or prognoses were left to speculation or subjectively guided assumptions. Said's claim that the factual elements in the work of intellectuals of the 'self-inflicted wound' were weak, ignorant, and cliché-ridden is central to this proposition. A spectrum of positionalities vis-à-vis 'the people' ranging from fetishism to contempt was based much less on dispassionate empirical inquiry than on subjective enthusiasms, affective choices, ready-made political identities and, indeed, strategic self-positioning. This is captured by Sobhi Hadidi's comment during our interview that culturalism in the Syrian context was not problematic in itself but because it utilises cultural interpretations to justify a predetermined position against the revolution. Predetermined by what exactly? That would be an important question for future research to uncover.

## Discussion

This chapter has argued that after the 2011 revolution, particularly after its violent turn and first wave of exile, the enlightening role of the Syrian intellectual was seriously questioned, and an ideal of radical embeddedness within society began to emerge within the exilic intellectual milieu.

That being said, at the time of this study, two types of relationality to 'the people' seemed to continue to coexist simultaneously- sometimes *within* the same intellectual: one (which we might call Bourdieusian) where intellectuals continued to subscribe to a broad prescriptive and often lofty discourse which reflected an assumed enlightening role and cognitive superiority, and another (which we might call Boltanskian) where intellectuals deferred to the judgement of the masses and insisted that it is up to them - not the intellectual - to decide where they should be heading. This division became the basis for a political schism whereby intellectuals who leaned more clearly to the former category (and it *is* a continuum) accepted with the intellectual's enlightening role a culturalist understanding of social and political conditions; while those more rooted in the Boltanskian approach pushed for a radically egalitarian positioning for the intellectual and generally leaned towards a structuralist and universalist understanding of society.

Yet, while both self-conceptions of the intellectual continued to coexist at various levels - overt and discreet, conscious and otherwise - it was clear that intellectuals' stance towards their home publics became increasingly marked by a combined sense of inferiority, indebtedness, and idealisation. Additionally, the sought role of trauma narration, often funded by NGOs but also motivated by a belief in the political efficacy of international compassion, called for identification with the suffering masses. As a result, there was a tendency to give up any enlightening role they may have still adopted prior to the revolution and identify with 'the people' aligning with what they perceived to be their general inclinations. Such alignment/identification sometimes included anti-intellectual sentiments, resulting in an anti-intellectualism that may be understood as an extreme form of epistemic egalitarianism.



Drawing on the notion of the embedded intellectual (Baert & Shipman, 2013), I have described a specific manifestation of this position, calling it *radical embeddedness* with the caveat that here, given displacement, it was more a sentimental, maybe compensatory, position than an embodied one. I suggest then that intellectual positioning can be fundamentally impacted by exile, which, through its humbling effect, can veer intellectuals towards a more egalitarian stance vis-à-vis domestic publics, particularly when combined with the task of trauma narration. By over-emphasising the intellectual's embeddedness within the masses and denying any distinction between the two, the radically embedded position obscured the guidance responsibilities that intellectuals were once thought to bear. In the case of Syria, this resulted in weakened discursive influence and avoidance of institutional politics.

Weakened discursive influence manifested in interventions that were politically hollow, critically hesitant, or dangerously appeasing, that is, interventions that failed to critique and guide the movement or propose postrevolutionary alternatives when the need for them was most critical. Abstinence from institutional politics was reflected in the weak representation of intellectuals in the political organisations that emerged from the movement. Despite their insistence on the importance of ending Syria's 'politicide' and enabling the resurrection of a free political life in Syria, intellectuals explicitly problematised and refrained from participation in the opposition's formal institutions or what they critically referred to as 'professional politics'. It is difficult to determine whether such trends were merely energised by the inclination toward radical embeddedness or if they resulted from it. What is clear, however, is that they are all congruent and entangled with it. For example, I have argued that refusing to perform a leadership role was influenced by a perception of an anti-leadership ethos within the movement and its publics. The embedded position was best aligned with such a critical stance towards the idea of leadership, and therefore, denunciation of leadership can be seen as both a cause and a symptom of the radically embedded position.

It is somewhat paradoxical that the embedded position is premised on the idea of interdependency between theory and praxis whereby the intellectual is in close dialogue with the community, learning from the public and teaching them all at once. And yet, in its extreme form where intellectuals not only acted on the basis of equality with 'the people' but inferiority to them, embeddedness was a hindrance to praxis. Not only did intellectuals resign any leadership responsibilities based on this positioning, but they became followers of public sentiment, offering uncritical solidarity towards what they perceived to be the people's will. Paired with a politically turbulent context in grave need of clear, timely, critical and performatively potent intellectual interventions, radical embeddedness may have been a hindrance to the movement in that it politically neutralised a critical discursive current (the secular democratic) too soon and left the opposition even more susceptible to competing discursive currents, many supported by geopolitically motivated forces.

Furthermore, the paradox of being embedded but uprooted complicated existing tensions within the intellectual and fostered new ones. Asylum in the West enabled free expression and resuscitated a long-stifled Syrian public sphere giving intellectuals a renewed sense of discursive agency. But it simultaneously undermined their credibility and influence at home, a sentiment that many readily internalised, as discussed earlier. In other words, as

intellectuals tried to maintain a self-concept of being engaged and revolutionary, doing so from the safety of exile weakened their credibility at home as the risk and sacrifice traditionally entailed in earning such symbolic power was now forgone, particularly when exile itself was seen as a privilege, not a sacrifice. Thus, they found themselves negotiating the elation of new-found freedom of expression with the frustration of irrelevance. Combined with the perceived political failure of diasporic institutions of the opposition, this weakened intellectuals' perceived social status and sense of (self-)worth, exacerbating perceived anti-intellectual sentiments towards and amongst them.

Reconciling postcolonial sensibilities with the movement towards democratisation, Syrian exiled intellectuals embraced a 'critical liminality' that rejects both Islam-demonising culturalist critique *and* the idea that modernity and principles like freedom and democracy are part of a European colonial project. They situated themselves within a cultural imaginary which construes such values as central to Syrian history and culture, new and ancient. And while culturalist critique was problematised in interviews, many offered culturalist explanations for the movement's failure and/or had practised it in their writings before 2011. Culturalism was thus specifically rejected when used as a pretext for siding against the revolution. It was tolerated for decades as a method of sociological explanation, but when it became the basis of a political position, that is, a claim that the prime source of social suffering was not the dictatorship but a regressive culture, culturalism became an adversary.

In closing, it is important to emphasise that while exiled intellectuals were more inclined towards Boltanskian solidarity than Bourdieusian criticality in how they related with their home publics, their solidarity and embeddedness were not likely to be based on rational assessments of the progressive or democratic potentialities of society but was rather affectively driven. Many participants seemed so traumatically immersed in the movement that they seemed to be operating in an 'altered state of consciousness manifested in frequent tears, blank silences, and frazzled narration' (fieldnotes, Al Azmeh, 2018). In other words, their 'faith in the people' was just that: *faith*. And it was deeply entangled with compassion and personal psychological trauma. This subjectivity is aided by the fact that it is impossible to base any such position or argument on factuality in the absence of independent empirical sociological research. Thus, diagnoses and prognoses were left to subjectively guided assumptions, affective choices and infranational or political identities. They were also often influenced by the ethics and aesthetics of the persona of the revolutionary intellectual and, indeed, by the inner workings of intellectual self-positioning.

## Conclusion

This dissertation has argued that at a time when the role and relevance of public intellectuals are being contested at a global scale, they garner renewed credibility and relevance in contexts of acute political unrest, particularly at the onset of a revolutionary movement. However, such credibility and correlated influence are volatile and susceptible not only to state repression—as is amply rehearsed in the literature—but also to popular scrutiny, particularly when intellectuals' discourses are misaligned with people's lived realities. The surge in intellectuals' influence is also susceptible to political ineffectiveness, particularly when they limit their involvement to the discursive field. In the case of Syria, these dilemmas have resulted in the fast decline of public intellectualism and the eventual discrediting and disempowerment of intellectuals. This, along with the movement's on-the-ground failure and mass-scale devastation, diverted intellectual interventions away from mobilisation, critique and praxis towards 'trauma work': work that is focused on garnering compassion rather than on influencing change from within.

The early targeting of intellectuals and civil society activists by the regime had an overwhelming impact upon survivors amongst them. This impacted the nature of their involvement in the movement, their decisions (vis-à-vis migration, among other things) and ultimately, the direction of the movement itself. But this was not the only threat to the civil democratic framing of the movement initially championed by intellectuals. This framing had ever decreasing purchase on social and political action because it was misaligned with people's lived realities—notably those relating to religiosity and to the regime's use of excessive violence. These misalignments may be connected to decades of systematic alienation and lack of understanding between intellectuals and the general population. The *performative power* of intellectuals was also weakened by the absence of charismatic leadership that could broadly and effectively communicate the tenets of the civil democratic framing through situated performances that can influence audiences' actions. While this is related to the early elimination of leaders in the civil current, it was exacerbated by the aversion of most surviving intellectuals to take up roles within the movement's political institutions. Limited political influence is also attributable to a loss of hope, particularly after the rise of Jihadism and Salafism, which was the final straw that shifted the focus of interventions from the *progressive narratives* of political change to the *tragic narrative* of the Syrian cultural trauma that framed the movement's *cognitive praxis*.

Discursive power alone could not create the kind of public spectacle that draws widescale attention to the civil emancipatory current. Instead, intellectuals became focused on building compassion for Syria's innumerable victims under the banner of establishing a *Syrian Cause*. Such focus can be understood as a symptom of the eradication of hope that the movement could independently achieve its objectives. Although this is seldom explicitly acknowledged, creating a cause really means garnering international support. As such, rather than develop a forward-looking political platform for domestic application, they focused on establishing a solidarity cause for external backing. In other words, the sense of political agency that the downfall of Mubarak and Bin Ali had generated was quickly

overtaken by a conviction that change cannot come from within and therefore hope resides in an international will to remove Assad (or in a reframing of the movement as part of a global struggle against power which will be the focus of a later section). Expectedly, and given the postcolonial implications of such a conviction, very few intellectuals were willing to explicitly present this belief as a cry for international intervention. While a military form of intervention was mostly decried, other unspecified forms of international involvement were implicitly sought but seldom openly explained. Not only would such explicitness aid the regime's accusations against the external opposition of 'service to imperial agendas', but it also betrays deep-seated concerns of unpatriotic complicity with the coloniser by betraying the country's long-sought national sovereignty. That said, some intellectuals within the pro-militarism group, particularly those in Paris, had rigorously attempted to coordinate with defecting officers via the National Council and the FSA as well as lobbying with French politicians at the highest levels to seek support for the revolution. With the former, they described a gradual loss of authority over the FSA and its officers; with European politicians, they described how such attempts were unsuccessful as explained in the following interview excerpt,

They are listening. They know everything... We have sent 25 reports to the International Court of Justice about war crimes in the regions we worked at, both by Jihadists and by the regime, especially against women. They know. But we are at an evil moment in human history because Islam is radicalising, and Christianity is radicalising too, at the popular level... they grew bored with the images of our victims... their governments don't have clear policies for how to support the Syrian people. It has become a question of distribution of interests. The Western media played this game. They will say Bashar is a tyrant, but they've created an even scarier one: Daesh, and the general tendency is to stick to the smaller tyrant to avoid Daesh... You will see, in the future, the story [that will remain] will be about Assad versus Jihadis. I'll tell you why, because the quick image created by Western media is like Newton's disc; it has many colours, but it spins so fast that all the public can see is white. The speed of news and changing events has turned the vision white and our narrative void. (Samar Yazbek, 2018, personal communication)

The tension created between the need to lobby with Western governments to end tyranny on the one hand, and postcolonial sentiments protective of national sovereignty and independence from colonial powers on the other, presents interesting questions for further investigation in decolonising cultural trauma theory. How does a focus on cultural trauma construction and its aspirations to establish a solidarity cause—i.e. 'engage an international audience' (Alexander, 2017, p. 111)—complicate the idea of complicity with the coloniser put forward by recent decolonial trauma scholarship (e.g. Mbembe, 2010; Visser, 2011).

The gender violence that Samar Yazbek alludes to was perhaps one of the most salient ways in which gender factored into the accounts in this study. Gender identity was, for the most part, relegated to a secondary position due to the urgent nature of other identifications and axes of oppression—whether domestically or in exile—discussed earlier. However, politicised gender violence emerged in several accounts, which had implications on political positions. Gendered violence was presented as a serious concern by both men and women participants, particularly when linked to dictatorship and the use of gendered violence and rape as a form of warfare.

Interestingly *symbolic* violence against women was presented as a concern only in the accounts of a few women, particularly those who identified as feminists (e.g. Samar Yazbek and Rosa Yassin Hassan). In these accounts, the omnipresence of symbolic violence against women was identified, whether exercised by the regime, society at large, the opposition or within the milieu of exiled intellectuals itself. Not only was gendered symbolic violence absent in the accounts of male participants, but some expressed upright hostility towards feminism and feminists: 'The Syrian feminist movement is a disaster. It's a disaster all over the world, but it's particularly extreme in the Syrian context. They're very aggressive' one male participant told me, describing militant feminism as 'a new dictatorship': 'It's inconceivable that we would go to such lengths to get rid of one dictatorship only to replace it with its replica.' (personal communication anonymized for this quote, 2018).

Some participants, including women, problematised 'White feminism' as a form of cultural imposition, positioning it as a Western cause. They emphasised how NGO funding's interest in gender issues has detracted attention from more urgent issues on the local arena, with the implication that authentic Syrian causes at the moment are human, not gendered (e.g. Golan Haji, Rosa Yassin Hassan, personal communication 2018). That said, there was an acknowledgement of gender as a problematic aspect of Syrian cultural identity; critique of Syrian society on gendered grounds was contrasted with a positive view of how Syrian women were thriving in exile (e.g. Sobhi Hadidi and Samar Yazbek). This critique was, importantly, of an agentic nature with specific descriptions of what gender issues need to be addressed, how, and when. War and violence were construed as an obstacle to any progress in this domain. 'I am certain that these messages will get through, but the bombing needs to stop, and for that to happen, we need a political solution' an anonymous participant (2018) tells me describing an outdoor exhibition his group organised in a small village near Aleppo during the bombardment of the city.

The airstrikes quieted down for a few days and people went to see the exhibition' he describes. 'There are photos, of an old man in his galabia with his niqabi wife looking at a poster which asks Syrian women to 'revolt against every authority' he recounts with a smile. (anonymous participant, 2018)

## Cultural trauma and subaltern specificities

Another complication related to cultural trauma in postcolonial contexts is that trauma work requires identification with its victims. In a social movement, such identification may generate some conflict between two important roles of the intellectual. The first is that of internal critique, which requires distance from the movement. The second is that of cultural trauma construction, which comes through identification with its victims. This is particularly true in the case of Syria, where a dual process is at play. The first is a lack of a period of latency in trauma narration. The second the focus of intellectual labour on cultural trauma construction, which defuses the critical role of intellectuals within the movement. In constructing the Syrian cultural trauma—particularly in its 'tragic narrative'— intellectuals increasingly diminished their efforts in / contribution to developing political thought,

critiquing and directing the movement's developments, and offering a 'progressive narrative' of redemption<sup>106</sup>.

Against contentions of cultural trauma scholarship (e.g. Alexander, 2012, pp. 29-30), it is frequent and prevalent for carrier groups in non-Western societies to carry through the trauma process. I contend that these processes are altered by the particularities of working from a position of marginality where intellectuals' involvement with trauma work is often marked by an embracement of this marginality and by the limitations of working under totalitarianism<sup>107</sup> coupled with a largely ambivalent international community. What marks trauma work increasingly in such contexts is that it is combined with a sense of hopelessness. Even when it is pessimistic about the possibility of change and/or justice, it is persistently undertaken – albeit with an ethical, even aesthetic, logic rather than a merely instrumental one that aims to reap what we can call after Nussbaum's idea of 'the social benefits of pity' (1992, p. 267), *the political benefits of pity*. In the case of Syria, exiled intellectuals seem to have little to no hope that their work might impact their country's future, let alone humanity's 'never again' promise. They have 'no illusions' about the impact of their work, yet they continue.

This persistence in doing trauma work was particularly evident in exile, where means of symbolic production<sup>108</sup> were accessible and the risk of persecution much lower. Some participants saw it as 'atonement' for past or present guilt, as discussed earlier. But, following Eyerman (2012, p.577), it can also be seen as a 'working through' and an 'acting out' of personal and collective wounds. Professional prospects and the quest for status are doubtlessly relevant to this 'hopeless' perseverance. But alone, none of these theoretical paradigms captures the complexity of a predominantly hopeless,<sup>109</sup> though intense, investment in the narration of collective trauma.

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<sup>106</sup> For more on the interaction between progressive and tragic trauma narratives, see Eyerman (2003) in relation to the cultural trauma of slavery in America and Alexander (2009) in relation to the cultural trauma of the Jewish holocaust).

<sup>107</sup> Pleseu (1996, pp.67-68) speaks of two types of marginality (imposed by dictatorship and by being a small country) which produce a species of intellectual he terms 'the non-profit intellectual' which had long expired in Western societies. This type of intellectual is already at home with marginality. The earnestness of older generation Syrian intellectuals and commitment to their habitus and self-conception as revolutionary intellectuals reconciled with working without clear purpose may be seen as an extension of years of conditioning as 'non-profit' intellectuals under dictatorship.

<sup>108</sup> The physical space where a social performance takes place, the mode of transmission it uses (e.g. live speech; radio, tv, online broadcast; print media; etc.) and the props that contribute indirectly to meaning construction (e.g. stage setup, clothing, back-drops, accessories, lighting etc.).

<sup>109</sup> There seems to be a slightly more hopeful outlook in the field of exiled human rights activism, recently energised by the landmark trial in Germany of former regime officer Colonel Anwar Raslan who was accused in April 2020 of overseeing the torture of thousands of Syrian prisoners.

## A politics of perceiving

When intellectuals in exile were free to voice their political grievances and narrate their collective trauma, albeit with ever-decreasing hope for change, their blame was partially directed towards 'the West' by which participants usually meant Western governments. These heightened tensions vis-à-vis host cultures where denunciation conflicted with referentiality and fostered resistance to integration. Although the necessity of adapting to a new socio-economical context was recognised, cultural integration was conflated with assimilation and deemed hegemonistic, nationalist, 'essentialist', 'xenophobic' and 'strange'.

Embracing marginality and resisting integration energised a performance of radicalism, particularly among the younger generation. This sometimes manifested in rebellious displays of 'non-performance' or a performance of the backstage self to use Goffman, that is, an emphasis on informality and an exaggerated embodiment of nonchalance. This was perhaps, at least partially, a gesture of rebellion against 'civility' as an expectation of the hegemonic host but might also be seen as a more agentic way of integrating into a specific niche within the host culture. Of course, the performance-of-non-performance is also associated with the artistic persona and was often adopted prior to migration. What is unique about its post-migration manifestations is immersion in an urban underground culture, particularly Berlin's alternative enclaves located in denigrated areas of high unemployment and poverty.

Performatively radical or not, resistance to integration, unemployment and precarity, coupled with an embracement of marginality, consolidated participants' position as exilic intellectuals in the Saidian sense: always being amateurs on the fringes of society liberated by their exile from the limitations of a career and the injunction to follow 'the prescribed path' (Said, 1996 [1993]).

Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter Three, the triple injury of 'cultural insult', international complicity in the Syrian tragedy, and a contested arrival into Europe provoked a surge of cultural pride that surmounted decades of cultural self-critique. Cultural pride interacted with a re-examination of Syrian society and revisionist reconstructions of its history and identity, resulting in a new and more egalitarian relationality with both Western societies and domestic publics.

Aided by a combination of exile, a political stalemate, a new international audience and funding opportunities, intellectuals became increasingly invested in memory work that is cosmopolitan in its lens and 'multidirectional' (Rothberg, 2009) in as much as it situates the Syrian trauma within global histories of violence. By presenting the Syrian war as a central event in our contemporary world and the movement against dictatorship as part of a global plight for justice and equality, participants were faithful to intellectuals' inclination towards universality. This universalistic angle also aligned their perspective with that of an expanding audience and funding resources while recuperating some sense of political agency: the idea that they can support the movement from their new position in the West by asserting its global relevance and repercussions, or by merging it with a constellation of other global movements, often within an intersectional paradigm of universal resistance to oppression. These theoretically diverse explanations of the move towards a cosmopolitan conceptual space offer another example of the theoretically contrapuntal or multi-layered explanations.

Together, hopeless persistence, resistance to integration, the freedom offered by an 'exilic' or 'amateur' intellectual positionality, and a surge in socio-cultural dignification energised a paradigm shift in the work of diasporic intellectuals from a *politics of being perceived* (i.e. how the West sees the Third World or influences its self-perception) to a *politics of perceiving*. Heretofore characterised by a focus on how the global periphery, and its intellectuals, are inhabited by the colonial Other, the study of Third World intellectuals has been saturated with a postcolonial hermeneutic that, this study suggests, calls for re-assessment, refocusing and transposition. A shift in paradigm seems to have already begun. It manifests in a shift in focus from self-analysis, navel gazing, cultural vindication and / or self-critique to an outward directed gaze that wants to 'make judgements about the world' (al-Haj Saleh, personal communication, 2018). It thrives on a collective self-narrative of resistant resilient victimhood and a self-assurance about intellectuals' position as intellectuals with a special vantage point, able to see the world from the very margin that unsettles it.

In this conceptual space intellectuals crystallised a path to collective self-knowledge, which focused on recognising Syria's place in the World and construed it as belonging to a profoundly oppressed margin which is acquiring increasing centrality by means of traumatic struggle against deeply unjust and essentially illegitimate regimes and an international world-order that colludes with them. This narrative—which one might say following Eyerman and Jamison (1991, p. 165) constituted the 'cosmological dimension' of the movement's cognitive praxis—had been developing slowly and somewhat clandestinely since the 1970s. But it wasn't until after 2011 that a true shift emerged in relation to the periphery's position in the world. The uprising of 2011 and subsequent traumas of persecution, killing and displacement enabled an unprecedented 'meaning struggle' driving forward this cognitive praxis, particularly after delivering it from decades of censorship, self-censorship and fear. Furthermore, it was on account of the enormity of the tragedy which the Syrian people confronted, and the bravery with which they faced it, that this cognitive praxis amounted to a paradigm shift: testing progressive narratives of history and repositioning the margin, through its very traumatic essence, at the centre. Expressions such as 'The Syrianization of the World' (e.g. al-Haj Saleh, 2019b) speak to this position and to the abandonment of a postcolonial hermeneutic depicting colonial subjects as perpetual objects of a historic injury. Instead, it presents them as ethical and political actors on a global scale resisting a variety of oppressions both domestic and global, capitalist, autocratic and Salafist. To reiterate here as I did in chapter Four, criticism directed toward Western hegemony is at least several decades long. What has changed is that it now constituted a much broader critique of power in which the weight of discursive investment shifted away from examining how home society has been victimised by that power, towards a critique of a 'world order' that victimises a burdened majority and environments everywhere in the world. Most interviews reflected this narrative; Bahra put it thus, 'There is an epistemic agency in seeing that your enemy is the whole world order not this ridiculous regime which is but a cog in its machine' (Bahra, personal communication, 2018). Third World peoples were thus construed as part of a global majority fighting against an unjust and unsustainable state of affairs in which the combination of populism and Islamophobia were compared to the once apocalyptic mix of fascism and anti-Semitism (al-Haj Saleh, 2016a).



## Radical embeddedness

Socio-cultural dignification and unconditional solidarity with the subjugated masses fed intellectuals' gravitation towards an ideal of embeddedness within their home society<sup>110</sup> much more compatible with their trauma narration role than any enlightening agenda might have allowed. This is because, as argued earlier, to narrate collective suffering one must fully identify with its victims. Intellectuals' relationship with their home publics became marked by a combined sense of solidarity, indebtedness, belonging and dependency. In this extreme form of embeddedness, intellectuals, suffering the old guilt of complicity and the new guilt of survival/exile, not only felt that they were epistemically equal but inferior to 'the people'<sup>111</sup>. This manifested in a tendency to align their views with what they perceived to be the general leanings of the revolting masses. The most obvious examples of this being the silence or denial with which most intellectuals confronted jihadist influence on the movement at its onset. This was in no small part related to the fact that accusations of jihadism and terrorism were at the core of the regime's discourse against the movement well before either started gaining credence. Another example of unconditional alignment with the movement's 'public opinion' can be seen in the wave of anti-intellectual sentiments that abided following the gradual discreditation of intellectuals among dissident Syrians, as discussed earlier, resulting in various forms of collective self-doubt. Furthermore, the belief that the revolting youth harboured anti-leadership sentiments or didn't want anyone to 'hijack' their revolution contributed to intellectuals' avoidance of political leadership roles. 'No one wants to be accused of hijacking the revolution,' Sadik Jalal al-Azm told The New York Times in 2011. 'This excessive fear is becoming a hindrance' he acknowledged (Worth, 2011).

Thus, with few exceptions, radical embeddedness led intellectuals to, on the one hand, abandon any 'enlightening role' and unsettle the notion of 'the *political* responsibility of the intellectual'<sup>112</sup> once reflected in the persona of the left-wing militant intellectual (Halabi, 2017). On the other hand, it defused the critical function of intellectuals within the movement. Interventions became hollow and hesitant (bar cliché-ridden criticism of the regime) mostly reproducing dominant narratives within the movement's public opinion.

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<sup>110</sup> Naturally, embeddedness was more sentimental and compensatory than actual given their physical distance.

<sup>111</sup> This sense of inferiority probably originated at the levels of courageousness and effectiveness in instigating change. But it gradually expanded to a sense of epistemic inferiority and the abandonment of the responsibility of the intellectual as the carrier of a revolutionary conscience. Such leadership responsibility was replaced with a duty of absolute solidarity with 'the people'. I want to emphasise here that, both egalitarianism and vanguardism (sometimes manifesting as social embeddedness and culturalist Orientalism) continued to mark the ways in which intellectuals related to their publics ; a tension that was evident not only in the two resulting modes of positionality but also often within the same participant as I will elaborate later in this chapter.

<sup>112</sup> Avoidance of direct political work and scepticism towards intellectuals' who took on formal role in the political opposition was paradoxically paired with an insistence on an Arendtian view of the centrality of politics. Participation in the movement was thus restricted to the public sphere and focused on articulating claims, representing interests and desires and trying to uphold the movement's emancipatory framing.

Retroactively, the discourses of the movement's intellectuals during that period were recognised as suffering serious shortcomings and omissions and requiring extensive revisions. By becoming markers of a revolutionary anti-dictatorship position, such omissions and denials particularly vis-à-vis the spread of Salafist factions further compromised the critical role of the movement's intellectuals.

The combination of engrossment in revolutionary thinking with abstention from applied politics bred what one might call a *sentimental radicalism*. Sentimental in that it did not provide a robust intellectual and programmatic description of how political transition will be achieved in Syria, nor a vision of a desired and plausible Syrian society to be aspired for after that transition. This is in no small part related to the broader historic context, namely the absence of a clear political ideology that can offer a shared vision of what progress looks like. Indeed, as McGowan reminds us, if socialism was the ideology of intellectuals since the 1970s, it is clear that their political ideology today is 'vague at best'. But for Syria, it was also attributable to an epistemically egalitarian position which hindered intellectuals' willingness to perform the social functions of intellectual leadership and socio-political critique within the movement.

Moreover, the paradox of being embedded but uprooted fostered new tensions. Empowered by freedom of expression in exile, intellectuals endeavoured to maintain an engaged positioning. This was offset by their remoteness, which undermined their credibility, access and influence at home. This took a toll on their confidence in offering bold interventions and exacerbated perceptions of anti-intellectualism towards and amongst them. It also deepened their schism with domestic intellectuals magnifying the impression of a 'divided opposition', which was crucial in determining the 'Syria strategy' among powerful global players.

Unconditional solidarity was rooted in a belief in the emancipatory potencies of the people: the view that ordinary Syrians will lead the transition into some form of democratic governance suitable with Syria's specificities. Such belief was likely not based on empirical assessment. In the absence of independent dispassionate sociological research or polls, it is impossible to base any such position on reasonable argument or factuality, particularly given the diversity and complexity of demographics across the Syrian geography. Thus, diagnoses and prognoses were left to subjectively guided assumptions, self-positioning, affective choices and, sometimes, infranational belongings. They were also influenced by the persona of the revolutionary intellectual.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> The impact of intellectuals' musings about what it means to be an intellectual is a question of potential future research interest. Under a rubric of examining the performative power of the sociology of intellectuals one might examine this literature's impact upon intellectuals' self-understanding and performance of their role and identity across cultural and historical contexts. In this study for example, there was an obvious degree of alignment between Said's representations of the exilic intellectual and Gramsci's figuration of the organic intellectual and between participants' self-understandings, descriptions and performance of their role.

As discussed in Chapter Five and briefly outlined above, radical embeddedness was a hindrance to praxis<sup>114</sup>. Paired with a politically turbulent context that called for clear, timely, critical and performatively potent intellectual interventions, radical embeddedness can thus be described as having been injurious to the democratisation movement. This is because it politically neutralised one of its most important carrier groups leaving its political representation weak and susceptible to the influence and sometimes outright domination of anti-democratic forces and geopolitical interests.

But while diversion towards trauma work and the related embedded positionality were politically disadvantageous, their divisive antagonistic nature contributed to the revival of a heretofore repressed public sphere and intellectual life transnationally. In other words, antagonistic trauma work, anti-intellectual embeddedness and related internal divisions may have been harmful to the movement at the political level, but they played a productive role in the establishment of a 'cognitive praxis' with immense social and political potentialities. Such potentialities are driven by the process of bringing into public debate previously censored but essential questions and issues. A notable example is the process undertaken by a number of civil society and opposition groups to organise inclusive workshops, projects, focus groups and various discussion platforms that aim to develop a contextualised understanding of issues like democracy, gender, citizenship, personal freedoms, sectarianism, secularism, corruption, governance, political life, national identity among others. Such practices have been drawing the contours for new understandings of these issues within the specific Syrian sociohistorical context; an essential step if we are to hope for any meaningful political social or cultural self-understanding and transformation.

In this way, our understanding of the role of the intellectual is complicated beyond the binaries of impact versus decline. Even when intellectuals are not directly impacting politics and/or policy, the discursive activity they energise and the debates they invigorate, carry within them seeds of influence, change, and evolution whose timelines and concrete outcomes are hard to predict.

Embeddedness does not automatically suggest a forfeiting of desire for power and status. But if in their hopeless perseverance intellectuals in this study were drawn to power, it was not through a vanguardist ideological framework like that of their predecessors in the 'militant intellectuals' generation, but through anti-leadership radical egalitarianism. This may be read as anti-positioning in relation to an earlier generation of 'reckless intellectuals' who in 'thinking big' and speaking authoritatively developed 'philotyrannical tendencies' (Lilla, 2001). It may also be read as part of the disenchantment with intellectual vanguardism that pervaded Marxist intellectual circles after the fall of the Eastern Block. Indeed, radical embeddedness can be seen as one of the manifestations of this anti-ideological and anti-leadership stance. This was not a case of a few anti-intellectual 'Trojan horses within' (Medvetz, 2018, p. 466) but a dominant attitude that defined the role of

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<sup>114</sup> Paradoxically, while embeddedness impeded praxis, it is through the belief in the interdependency between theory and praxis, familiar to the figuration of the revolutionary intellectual, that the embedded position thrived. But because it took such an extreme form and was paired with exile (with its limiting implications for praxis) as well as a politically turbulent context (warranting particularly powerful, critical and performatively potent interventions), it contributed to weakened praxis.

public intellectuals. This came at a time when their analyses and leadership were, for once, sought<sup>115</sup> and when their absence from the institutional political arena amounted to an existential risk in a post-Syria Middle East.

Finally, it is important to note that the radically embedded intellectual is of course an ideal type and was never present in a pure form in reality. Drawing on Baert and Shipman's notion of the embedded intellectual, the *radically* embedded intellectual is characterised by a stance of epistemic hyper-egalitarianism: so radical that they no longer see themselves as 'equal partners with their publics' (Baert & Shipman, 2013) but rather as followers and dependents of them. Identifying with a vague construct of 'the people' and aligning with what they perceive to be their inclinations, they offer unconditional and uncritical solidarity towards the subjugated masses. By doing so they unsettle understandings of 'the *political* responsibility of the intellectual' once adopted by left-wing militant intellectual in the 1960s and 1970s (Halabi, 2017). They defuse the critical function of the intellectual within a social movement abstaining from political leadership and organisations and offering intellectual interventions that are politically thin, critically hesitant and merely reproduce dominant narratives within the movement's public opinion.

Other types of relationality to 'the people' coexisted sometimes in negotiation within the same intellectual. As discussed in chapter four, in addition to these 'Boltanskian' intellectuals who deferred to the judgement of the masses, there were a few 'Bourdieuian' intellectuals in the sample who insisted on a broad perspective and assumed an 'enlightening role' rooted in a sense of cognitive superiority. Interestingly, the latter group did not, generally speaking, engage in trauma work. The dissertation has argued that this division became the basis for a political schism whereby intellectuals who leaned more towards a Bourdieusian enlightening model generally adopted a socially critical stance that maintained scepticism towards the revolutionary movement, while those more strongly rooted the Boltanskian intellectual tradition pushed for a pluralism of critiques and adopted the radically embedded position. The two positions formed a continuum not a binary.

Serious political engagement, even leadership, by democratic public intellectuals in countries experiencing fraught transitions towards democracy is important not only for those countries but also for a world in which the 'collapse of the ambitious public agendas of the intellectuals' has left Western democracies with a kind of public intellectual committed to democracy but heedless towards the conditions that make it possible (Auckert, 2016, p. 316). To address this epistemic lack, Auckert calls for 'guidance from intellectuals who understand the world as it is and its possibilities as they are', in order to guide Western governments on 'how to stand toward a politics different from what we find in the democratic West' (p. 317). Lorella Ventura (2017) similarly addresses a 'significant problem concerning western democracy' in which the Orientalist stereotypes pervading accounts of the events in the Arab region since 2010, make it 'very difficult to perceive the actual situation, processes and interests and to judge them accurately' alerting her reader to the 'risk... that when in the West we realize what is actually happening in the Arab world, it

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<sup>115</sup> Not only by Western allies as a non-Islamist alternative to Assad but also by considerable segments of the Syrian public.

will be too late – and we will have already contributed to the collapse of an entire region into a nightmare from which it will be very difficult to wake up’. What is needed, I suggest, in order to achieve what Auckert (2016, p. 317) calls a ‘new public intellectualism to help clarify our world’ and those ‘different’ politics, is a more dialogical approach: a willingness to engage and learn from the experience of intellectuals in the periphery who do understand such politics from within, can appreciate the specificities of their ‘unlikely’ societies and can contribute knowledgeably to debates on what is to be done. Indeed, if global politics suffers from a lack of understanding of the world’s diverse societies and specific political contexts, it is not because ‘we no longer have intellectual tools adequate to the job’ (Auckert, 2016, p. 317), but because those more able to inform public and expert opinion on politics in the periphery have been rendered invisible. In this respect, decolonising the academy has been a promising first step.

The reversal of the invisibility of peripheral intellectuals within global political discourses is of course a shared responsibility. In the Syrian context, the experience of exile is likely to have a decidedly positive impact in this vein with a new generation of intellectuals becoming better equipped, socially and intellectually, to enter the global debate. Indeed, the invisibility of Syrian thinkers and intellectuals may already be receding on account of the shift towards the *politics of perceiving* discussed earlier. According to al-Haj Saleh, this is due to the retrieval of a certain sense of *personal* agency following the revolution and the experience of exile, both of which have put Syrian intellectuals in a better position to contribute knowledge and raise questions not only about their world but also about the world at large. He told me,

This earned sense of agency has changed us very much; not just politically. We are today making ethical judgement about the world... epistemically, we are no longer only a source of quotes and soundbites for Western journalists and analysts. We are a source of theories, concepts and analyses. Clearly not sufficiently, of course not, of course. But at least representing Syria epistemically is something we do today. Not Patrick Seal or Robert Fisk. (Yassin al-Haj Saleh, personal communication, 2018)

Migration and exile are very much part of the constellation of factors shaping the above-described phenomena having a fundamental impact upon intellectuals’ self-positioning. For example, a combination of affects and circumstances instigated by exile have been shown to veer intellectuals towards a significantly less critical stance towards domestic publics. Among these are a sense of guilt and compassion that motivates a shift away from critique towards trauma narration; a loss of social relevance that weakens their epistemic confidence vis-à-vis what is happening at home as well as their ability to engage politically on the ground; freedom of expression which galvanised them into fervent articulation and documentation of long-withheld grievances and chronic traumas; NGO funding which supported such articulation; a cosmopolitan perspective that encouraged them to situate their collective trauma globally and historically; and the humbling impact of exile which cuts the edge off characteristic epistemic arrogance. Combined these factors contributed to the radically embedded self-positioning described earlier. The resulting radically egalitarian discourse weakened intellectuals’ discursive vigour and shielded many from the burdens and complexities of institutionalised political work. One explanation that I have suggested in this work is that over-emphasising the intellectual’s embeddedness within society at the grassroots level and denying a long-cherished distinction between intellectual and other

(e.g. the masses or laypersons) dilutes the idea of 'the intellectual' as identity or aspiration and with it, long-held ideas about her critical, political and militant roles and responsibilities.

While this is not a study of emigre intellectuals, it has on occasions adopted a comparative lens with regards to the impact of exile upon them. Like their German counterparts in America after WWII, intellectuals in this study were for the most part disinterested in becoming integrated and predominantly saw themselves as perpetual immigrants; 'nomads in the universe of the mind' (Krohn, 1993, p.179).

There were also striking similarities with the experience of Palestinian and Iraqi intellectuals particularly in how they came to relate to their home and host societies. These similarities are striking in at least two respects. Firstly, all three experienced a universalising shift of register from local specifics to universalist abstractions and readings of their national trauma in light of a universal narrative of oppression. This universalising role was adjacent to a particularising one where this universal discourse of emancipation was situated within the cultural and political specificities of the local event. Such comparisons with other historical events signal the process of establishing the 'cosmological dimension' of exiled intellectuals' cognitive praxis.

The second similarity is the way in which intellectuals accounted for distance and criticality in constructing their self-positioning as critical intellectuals with a unique role in social change. Exiled intellectuals' state of liminality between two cultures was consistently valorised as a critical advantage enabling a plurality of perspectives vital for the intellectual mind. These parallels may signal a potential transnational and cross-generational influence between intellectuals suggesting that intellectuals internalise past and contemporary peers' self-reflections in defining their own role, attitudes, experiences and personae. While I allude in this dissertation to the influence that such writings may have on intellectuals' self-understanding and performance of their role and identity across cultural and historical contexts, I find this topic worthy of an independent scholarly investigation. By underscoring the (per)formative impact of studies on intellectuals, such an inquiry might investigate how writings about intellectuals infuse their collective imagination with notions about their own roles and relationalities. It might illuminate how such influence might engender varying degrees of alignment / misalignment between that perceived role and relationalities on the one hand and the needs of the societies they address and their unique historical circumstances on the other. Differences between the findings here and findings from studies of other groups should be succinctly set out and reflected on. The uniqueness and non-uniqueness of this case would then be more apparent.

In circumstances of war and cultural trauma, intellectual interventions cannot be solely understood as speech acts that situate their authors within competitive arenas where intellectuals vie for financial resources and symbolic status. These factors are of course still potent, and field-specific power dynamics are certainly at play: notably competition over symbolic capital attained through sacrifices for the movement, or what I have referred to expanding on Bourdieu as *persecution capital*. However, interventions in these contexts are also affectively influenced by politically rooted personal and collective traumas which have clearly shaken many of the participants to the core, making it necessary for them to 'work through' and 'act out' related emotions through intellectual labour. Tensions between the different factors influencing intellectual interventions permeated the field (i.e. material motivations, field-specific symbolic-power dynamics, and affective drives in the form of

emotional responses to trauma). Underlying the need (social and psychological) to reconcile these tensions were difficult processes of negotiation, occasionally reflected in the public sphere. This often happened through a process of accusation, which triggered self-justification to present concessional positions or engagements as reactions to the agency of others—what Bruner terms ‘reactive agency’<sup>116</sup>. The multiple material, symbolic and psychological drivers for intellectual self-positioning and the contestations, accusations and negotiations that sought to reconcile them aggravated an already hostile field and encouraged the constitution of mutually antagonistic intellectual collectives.

Intellectuals resisted repositioning despite disillusionment with the movement’s ability to achieve its objectives. Supporting the revolution was not about believing it would work. It was about solidarity and a commitment to the performance of engaged intellectualism as they knew it. While much could be highlighted that would encourage some level of repositioning, most were steadfast in performing the social script for the dissident intellectual. They remained true to the persona of the revolutionary intellectual and paid tribute, in almost everything they did, to the suffering masses they had left behind. The closest they came to repositioning was to adopt a more nuanced stance towards the movement, one which valorises the complexity of truth over absolute political partisanship. This is reflected in Arodaki’s acknowledgement (personal communication, 2018) that despite being ‘disillusioned’ with the movement, he ‘never changed [his] supportive position towards it’. The private and public disappointments of intellectuals, particularly of the older generation, did not lead to a repositioning towards a more pragmatically promising position. They embraced failure with hopelessness that seemed both bitter and stoic, evident in Arodaki’s continuation of the above statement after a self-reflective pause, ‘If we were to measure the matter based on our personal lives as individuals, of course, there is failure at every level. There is an even greater failure at the level of the opposition’.

It is clear, then, that when it comes to politics, Syrian intellectuals have circled back to Sisyphean labour (Haugbølle, 2015) now weighed down by the phantoms of millions of more victims: the dead, the disappeared, the tortured, the displaced and indeed (as promised by the Shabbiha<sup>117</sup>) a ‘burning country’<sup>118</sup>. That they continue to work is testament to an embracement of their own marginality, their resignation to suffice with the role of bearing witness, with being ‘a voice in the wilderness’ (Haugbølle, 2015), which ‘without any illusions’ (Yaseen-Hassan, personal communication, 2018) insists to continue. Perhaps in this second decade of the twenty-first century, it might be reasonable to say that intellectuals in the periphery are condemned not to hope as Wannous (1996) once prophesised—for that seems to have already been largely depleted—but to *hopeless perseverance*. John Michael (2016, p. 97) asked, ‘Does the critical intellectual have a place in a hopeless world?’. This study suggests that yes. But more than ever, this role is reduced to

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<sup>116</sup> Responses to the (perceived) agency of those with a strong influence or power, for example the realities of the neo-liberal labour market which drive young writers to work for media organisations with clear political agendas or questionable funding.

<sup>117</sup> Pro-Assad militias

<sup>118</sup> In reference to the famous pro-Assad slogan ‘Assad or we burn the country’.

an aesthetic and ethical space. For '[i]f after hope comes melancholia, the question that has emerged in the Arab world since the counter-revolutions is: What comes after melancholia?' (Hanssen, 2020). From where I stand on the other side of this research: *beautiful, just and hopeless perseverance*.



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## Appendix A - interview protocol

### Interview request

Dear [name of prospective participant],

My name is Zeina al-Azmeh and I am a Syrian PhD student at the University of Cambridge. My research is concerned with how Syrian intellectuals in exile (specifically Berlin and Paris) interact with the political and social transformations taking place in Syria, and the cultural and social phenomena that they contribute to shaping during this process. The study adopts a theoretical framework based on cultural trauma theory, performativity and intellectual positioning theory and seeks to answer questions related to:

1. The production (and reproduction) of meaning, at the beginning of the revolution, during the revolution, and in the current phase, as well as transformations in this process and the impact of exile/migration on it.
2. Personal wounds and their relation to the collective wound or trauma, or so-called cultural trauma.
3. Cultural mediation networks (media organizations, production entities, publishing and distribution houses, websites...). Its impact on the mechanisms of meaning at the individual and collective levels.

The research methodology is based on the analysis of the content of books, articles, interviews, films, theatre and art produced by Syrians since 2011, ethnography (during my time in Berlin and Paris), and interviews (about 30 semi-structured interviews).

I will be in Paris/Berlin from [date] to [date] and I sincerely hope to meet with you. The content of the interview will be used for search purposes only and participants can choose to participate anonymously if they wish to. A consent form, in line with the University policies, will have to be signed before we commence the interview during which we can discuss and agree upon these matters.

If you are in principle interested in participating, I am happy to send you a draft of the interview questions/guide and the approval form for review.

I hope to interview you soon. In the meantime, please accept my sincere appreciation,  
Zeina

## Informed consent form

**Title of Project: Exiled Syrian Intellectuals and the Syrian Conflict**

**Name of Researcher: Zina Al Azmeh**

As part of a research project on Syrian exiled intellectuals' engagement with the conflict in Syria I am conducting interviews. You will be asked questions about your intellectual work, your experience of exile and how it has shaped your outlook and attitudes, and your views about the role of exiled intellectuals in political struggle. This research is being conducted as part of a PhD dissertation.

The interview will take about 90 minutes.

If you would like me to send you further information about this project please write your e-mail address here \_\_\_\_\_

**Please tick relevant boxes**

1. I confirm that I have understood these instructions and have had the ☐
2. opportunity to ask questions. ☐
3. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. ☐
4. I understand that my responses will only be used for academic research. ☐
5. I request that all my responses be anonymised and that my name is not mentioned in any part of the research ☐
6. I understand that my interview will be recorded for transcription purposes and that the recording will be safeguarded and will not be used for any other purposes. ☐
7. I agree to take part in the above project. ☐

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

## English translation of guiding interview questions

### Section one: cultural trauma-construction of meaning

1. Setting aside materialist explanations, important as they might be, what in your opinion were the meanings with which Syrians interacted during and before 2011.
2. What in your opinion are the historic and cultural references of these meanings in Syria?
3. Does your work engage with the struggle in Syria? Are you able to impact it?
4. Have these meaning of justice, rule of law and dignity which you identified earlier changed over time?
5. Do you think the dominant narrative(s) among intellectuals about what is happening in Syria [for example that these are popular uprisings leading to a revolution which will eventually reap results, rather than a conspiracy or a civil war or a proxy war...] are wide spread among Syrians?
6. After the latest developments has your position or your feelings towards the revolution changed?
7. When and why did you leave Syria?
8. Did being in France/Germany impact your work?
9. Do you agree with the emerging and increasing popular binary of insider and outsider intellectuals? Are they truly two clusters or is it a false binary?
10. How common do you think culturalist interpretations of the Syrian situation including internal orientalism narratives are among exiled intellectuals?
11. Do you think the intellectuals has specific responsibilities during times of political struggle?
12. Do you agree that intellectuals struggle is the only struggle left, do you agree with this discourse?
13. Some researchers (e.g. Kassab, 2014) have discussed a relationship of mutual empowerment between intellectuals as a social category with an emancipatory agenda and the revolting multitude as the ultimate agent of change. You spoke of separation between the intellectual and the masses in the Syrian context. Do you think this type of relationship was/is possible in Syria despite the separation or was it a dysfunctional cycle?

### Section two: personal trauma – existential outlook

1. Would you say that events in Syria have been traumatic to you at the personal level?
2. How did this personal trauma impact your work?
3. How did it impact your views on agency?
4. How has your existential outlook impacted by trauma?
5. Do you have any guilt in relation to Syria?
6. Going back to your understanding of the idea of meaning. Has it changed?
7. What is the responsibility of the intellectual towards collective memory and what is your view on the importance of constructing such memory not only in relation to justice but beyond.
8. Do you have a sense of belonging?
9. Do you believe this idea of “Syrianness” is solid or shifting? Clear or vague? Consistent or relative? How would you describe the notion of a collective Syrian identity today?
10. How is that collective identity impacted by mass migration?
11. Can you tell me about your relationship with memory. Has it been impacted by immigration or by trauma?

### Section three: investigating social phenomena

1. What definition of the notion of the ‘intellectual’ best describes your views?

2. Have any configurations emerged within exiled intellectuals for example in relation to Saleh's notion of the "prophetic" or "authoritative" intellectual receding against the rise of the "dialogical" or "embedded" intellectual, or with what Abbas Baydoun calls the "common" intellectual? Would you say you recognize such dynamics?
3. Are you part of a network of friends who work in the cultural field?
4. Given the role of new media in the Syrian uprising, and the impact of the internet on intellectuals (e.g. Kurzman, 2002, p. 81; Baert & Morgan, 2017, p.13), how would you describe the topography of the new Syrian exilic public sphere (Mheithawi, 2013, p.29; Al-Yasiri, 2015)? What networks, outlets, and means of production have emerged (Elias; 2016), and what implications do they have on the reach, impact, and position of exiled intellectuals? What opportunities do they present, and what challenges?
5. Does this apply to non-commercial and non-western publishers?
6. Has the availability of these opportunities impacted the positioning of the intellectual in exile?
7. With whom do you currently publish/produce/distribute your work?
8. How has the German reception of your work been?
9. how does this reception influence your work?
10. How does the reception of your readers impact your publishers and their choice of topic.