



Authorial Power, Authoritarianism, and Exiled Intellectuals: Syria and Turkey

Zeina Al Azmeh¹  · Jo-Anne Dillabough²

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Abstract

How does a crisis of the state and its ‘emergency politics’ lead to a crisis of the intellectual, or what does it mean to be an intellectual in our contemporary conjuncture beyond Western clichés and the universalistic bias of their declinist arguments? In responding to these questions, we draw upon data collected from Turkish and Syrian academics living in exile to argue that the critical commitments exiled intellectuals presume are under threat as rising authoritarianisms take hold globally and advanced neo-liberal practices tighten their grip on universities. The promise of Said’s figuration of the ‘intellectual in exile’ and its political potential is also under threat as displaced scholars navigate democratic backsliding and structural precarity in the contemporary university and in the nation-states to which they have found themselves tied, eroding even further the conceptual idea of the critical intellectual and the potential power of the ‘post-colonial intellectual’. In our research, this crisis of the intellectual is recounted by exilics paradoxically in both the autocratic and the ‘nominally democratic’ higher education (HE) context where in some cases the very idea of the intellectual can represent, at least in part, a banal political figuration epitomised in what Nancy Fraser refers to as *progressive neo-liberalism*. This is largely so because both authoritarian and nominally democratic states, whilst different in political charge, are simultaneously invoking ‘states of emergency’ and culture wars that are eroding their own intellectual constituencies’ ability to disturb existing institutional norms and the taken for granted problems that emerge in everyday HE practices.

Keywords Critical intellectuals · Exilic intellectuals · Scholars in exile · Higher education and authoritarianism · Turkish academics · Syrian academics · Crisis of critique

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Extended author information available on the last page of the article

Introduction

In this paper, we draw upon data collected from Turkish and Syrian academics living in exile to pose the following overarching question: how does a crisis of the state and its ‘emergency politics’ (Honig, 2009) lead to a crisis of the intellectual or what does it mean to be an intellectual in our contemporary conjuncture beyond Western clichés and the universalistic bias of their declinist arguments (Small, 2002)? In posing this question, we seek to move beyond the case raised by Ponzanesi (2021, p. 437) who outlined an understanding of the contemporary ‘postcolonial’ intellectual as a knowledge producer energised by an ‘understanding of their location in imperial-colonial orders’ and of ‘their location in knowledge-power regimes.’ In this way, the postcolonial intellectual might be understood as a specific type of critical intellectual with a global vantage point and a ‘commitment, both individual and collective, to social change’ (Ponzanesi, 2021, p. 444). In the context of this paper, whilst we refer to the Turkish and Syrian participants we worked with as exiled rather than ‘postcolonial’ intellectuals, this self-awareness of one’s position within imperial/colonial orders and knowledge-power regimes captures the shared aspect of our research participants’ ‘ethicopolitical self-positioning’ (see Baert, 2012).

Yet, what if this positioning and its underlying commitments are undermined by a particular conjunctural moment – when ‘different social, political, economic and ideological contradictions that are at work in society come together to give it a specific and distinctive shape’ (Hall & Massey, 2010, p. 57). In our conjuncture, relatively autonomous sites – sometimes with different origins and driven by different contradictions and temporalities – are condensed to create a crisis of critique; that is, a break in established ideas about the critical role of the intellectual. Examples of this could be the utilisation of the scholar as monitor in times of heightened surveillance, as ‘cultural dupe’, informer, or ‘terrorist’, alongside the growth of the ‘progressive neo-liberal’ scholar combining a belief system and/or life choices that are implicated in a ‘regressive political economy with a progressive veneer of diversity and the “empowerment” of minority constituencies’ (see Fraser, 2017, p. 99).

Arguably, this crisis of critique deepens the ‘second class’ status often attributed to exilic scholars purged from their home universities as a consequence of ‘speaking truth to power’, but still unable to fulfil their aspired critical role in the ‘privatised’ Western academy where they are bureaucratised and often dismissed as part of a mass non-community subjected to ‘waiting zones’ or marginalised through a politics of pity and its ‘humanitarian’ framings (Sertdemir Ozdemir, 2021a).

Such orientation to the specificity of the crisis of critique in our current conjuncture – and attention to its complexity in HE in relation to the exilic scholar – is one of our aims insofar as we can document its transformational potential and its current conditions, with the possibility for comprehending new kinds of intellectual ‘settlements’, new alignments, or to overcome (or at least stabilise) existing antagonisms and contradictions.

Whilst our empirical work does in many ways capture figurative accounts of the exilic intellectual as one of dissidence and resistance to authoritarian regimes,

it seems that the commitments they presume are becoming increasingly untenable as authoritarianism takes hold globally and advanced neoliberal governance structures increasingly disrupt universities' 'public missions' and their capacity for political critique and transformation. As Martini and Robertson (2022) suggest, such developments are creating conditions that risk the erasure of any ideal and potency of the scholar-activist and of the university as a platform for social and political change. The twin effects of advanced neo-liberal authoritarianism and the absorption of the scholar into the machinations of bureaucracy therefore arguably represent a new stage in the commodification of the scholar, regulating their capacity to confront their historical moment and its associated crises, where the nature of its resolution remains masked. Consequently, these untenable commitments, often resting alongside nomadic precarity, create inner tensions within the intellectual that are often unresolvable. Building particularly on Isin's (2018, p.xiii) view that 'postcolonial intellectuals traverse both dominant and dominated positions', we wish to highlight the potential and threats these tensions pose to knowledge production and the mission of critique in a historical moment increasingly defined by heightened geopolitical conflict, growing authoritarianism, and war.

We also expose contradictory professional roles and inner conflicts between, on the one hand, the potential for exilic intellectuals to energise alternative modalities of knowledge production, revive forms of historical responsibility, and claim novel transnational and post-national spaces of political life; and on the other hand, the serious obstacles of persecution under authoritarianism and disillusionment and/or co-optation within advanced (neo)liberal democracies that seek to privatise the scholar and threaten to fade their critical capacity. In this way, we do not take the idea of the intellectual for granted but instead examine it within the realm of Scott's 'problem space', arguing that it provides a central conceptual tool for contextualising the varied dilemmas, contradictions, paradoxes, and practices that all forms of intellectualism necessarily bring to academic labour (see also Dillabough, 2022).

Our argument is twofold. We argue that by unsettling the status quo, the exiled scholar can create the conditions of possibility for new and meaningful modalities of knowledge production and education. These include the creation of transnational networks of solidarity and shared thinking that engender new political subjectivities and possibilities inside and outside the academy. Yet, simultaneously, the tensions generated by the very conditions of exile complicate Said's valorisation of the figuration of 'the intellectual in exile' (1993) as a positionality that supposedly distances the intellectual both from their home society (allowing them to maintain a supposed critical marginality) and from institutional academic commitments that enforce neo-liberal imperatives (allowing them to maintain a position of 'intellectual amateurism' (ibid)).

Furthermore, we argue that analyses of exilic intellectuals' self-reflective discourses also provide a significant mechanism for revealing hidden aspects of the conjunctural conditions of contemporary intellectual labour and its future movements globally, giving exilic intellectuals a prescient *alterity and priority* that they retain over the present as their narratives do not simply problematise the rise of authoritarianism or populism in HE. They also reveal the contradictions and power relations that are at play in this conjunctural moment which, as Althusser contends, 'fuse in a ruptural

unity'. This fusion points to a crisis that is overdetermined through the figure of the displaced intellectual who is standing in '*for ... the time of the other*' (Levinas, cited in Di Paolantonio, 2010, p. xiii, see also Simon, 2005) – those many others displaced in previous historical moments. In this way, the memories of exilic scholars represent a kind of subaltern time – a public memory which can in part account for other exilic pasts – stories that ought to be central to the potential resolution of the crisis itself. Moreover, these memories help us to better understand why the idea of 'the intellectual' as authority over political promise is in need of new frames of understanding and of new questions, particularly at a time where political promise is diminishing globally. We see the exilic condition therefore as representing a testing ground both for the task of politics and of modernity itself.

To animate our arguments, we draw on interviews with exiled intellectuals and academics from Syria and Turkey. These interviews are organised in two datasets which were collected separately. The first was collected through interviews conducted with Syrian academics and intellectuals in Europe in 2018 as part of a 4-year study on the engagement of exiled Syrian intellectuals with the uprising of 2011 (see Al Azmeh, 2021a). Here, data collection was organised in two stages. The first stage focused on Syrian exiled intellectuals' interventions. It involved the review and analysis of the work of exiled Syrian writers and artists exiled in Paris or Berlin with a focus on their post-2011 outputs. Documents were selected on the basis of their potential to inform tentatively identified themes and were screened before finalising the selection of participants. They included books, articles, media interviews, films, and playscripts. A close analysis of the themes and codes that emerged from this initial investigation shaped the development of interview protocols for interviewing exiled Syrian scholars. Where texts were available in English, they were used. But expectedly, the majority were in Arabic. The second stage of fieldwork consisted of interviews and participant observation. Travelling to Paris and Berlin over the course of 6 months, fieldwork provided a deeper understanding of both the participants' experiences of exile, as well as the discursive field they were shaping as artists and intellectuals. A total of 29 semi-structured interviews were undertaken. Interviews were divided into three sections corresponding to the following themes: meaning construction; existential outlook and personal experiences; the topology of the exilic public sphere and mediation/funding networks. The Syrian interviews were conducted in Arabic and then translated and transcribed into English by the first author of this paper. 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), we do not attempt to define the intellectual as an objective endeavour. For the purpose of sampling, however, 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. For this paper, only data from participants who were also members of an academic institution was analysed and cited.

The second dataset constitutes fieldwork and unstructured interviews with 16 Turkish academics in the UK and Europe in 2021 and 2022, forming part of a larger cohort of Turkish academics in exile collected for an Economic and Social

Research Council (ESRC)-funded comparative case study on HE and authoritarianism. Most interviews were audiotaped; however, in a small number of cases, interviews were documented in the form of note-taking and were recorded in a fieldnote archive. In the case of the Turkish participants, most had been displaced relatively recently leaving either just before the 2016 coup or not long afterwards whilst others were overseas at the time of the coup and decided not to return for fear of political reprisals from senior academic leaders or police. In a smaller number of cases, some Turkish scholars were cross-appointed to universities in Turkey and the UK and/or Europe after the transformation of Turkey's return to authoritarian rule, particularly after Erdogan's attempts at eliminating Turkish and Syrian minorities in north-eastern Syria (e.g. KYP). After signing the Academic for Peace petition, many too were fired, charged with terrorism and forced out of Turkey, and were living in highly precarious employment circumstances, often moving from one short term academic contract to another. The Turkish interviews were conducted in English and the themes explored were as follows: background to personal and professional exile, examples of authoritarian strains of HE, threats to HE 'public missions', academic freedom, new political crises (manufactured or real) by the state and/or HE; professional life before and after exile and in the Western academy; and questions about the role of the scholar-activist in contemporary HE. Interviews were analysed using a conceptually driven form of content analysis derived from previous conceptual studies of exile we had undertaken (e.g. crisis, rupture, surveillance, critique, critical intellectualism, exilic subaltern time, alterity, borders) that highlighted enduring themes emerging across the corpus of interviews.

In the sections that follow, we examine the relationship between the academic scholar and the figure of the public intellectual particularly honing in on the cases where, and degrees to which, this latter figuration of the intellectual discursively informs the idea of the scholar. We also examine the degree to which this figuration of the intellectual practically conflicts with the ability to contribute to the task of critique in the current conjuncture, both in the context of the authoritarian university and the highly instrumentalised neoliberal academy. We suggest that this conflict between the scholar as critical intellectual and the scholar as a self-institutionalising 'professional' creates a crisis of critique rendering critical intellectualism a 'problem space' (see Scott, 2004) in need of new frameworks and new questions. Through this figuration of intellectual exile, and drawing upon our interviews, we interrogate the conditions of this conjunctural moment as a way towards developing new frames of understanding about the future of academic critique and the post-colonial intellectual. We also raise questions that might confront its complications, contradictions, paradoxes, and aporias. In seeking to confront these issues, we want to emphasise the importance of exilics' 'vocabularies of remembrance' (see Felman, 2001) as a way of thinking critically about a rupture in the idea and potency of the critical intellectual and their historical significance. We also view these memories as representing a 'holding space' and diasporic archive of rare political memory that can be mobilised into the future, and one that does not undermine exilic scholars demands for justice or their own political potential. We bridge Critical HE Studies and the Sociology of Intellectuals to demonstrate how the figure of the exiled intellectual can be seen as instructive in this vital task. We then call into question

idealistic aspects of this figuration as reflected in our empirical work and the aporias faced in the practice of critique, sometimes experienced as necropolitics within the academy (Mbembé, 2003). We construe this necropolitics as a struggle over narrative or the right to sincere storytelling about the past suggesting that it represents a struggle that unsettles hegemonic notions of belonging and nationhood, potentially transforming the task of critique and confronting crises both in terms of what the critical intellectual is and can be – that is a comprehension of a new post-colonial figuration for a new time. Finally, we highlight the dormant potential within an exilic positionality, which, if released from these pressures, can create a generative marginality akin to Said's figuration of 'the intellectual in exile' engendering innovative alternative modes of knowledge production and dissemination and allowing intellectuals to interpolate intergenerational patterns of colonial or sovereign violence and to resist the eradication of minoritarian cultural memory in authoritarian spaces. Such developments have the potential to resituate the task of critique within broader transnational frameworks operating through transitional as well as relatively stable networks of knowledge production and resistance.

Historical Context

In March 2011, protests erupted across Syria echoing revolutions that toppled down longstanding authoritarian regimes in neighbouring countries. When these protests developed into a civil-proxy war, many academics and intellectuals lost hope for political change and became concerned for their safety which forced them into exile. While they continued to engage with the political situation in their home country in various capacities, the nature of their engagement changed drastically as a result of their exile as did their relationality with their home societies (Al Azmeh, 2021b). In some cases, their experience of exile energised new modalities of knowledge production and political subjectivities that were neither tenable nor productive while they were in Syria. But such experiences also presented contradictions and tensions that brought to the surface fundamental paradoxes about both the figure and role of the intellectual and how they relate to political crisis. They also simultaneously exposed the ways in which the conceptual nucleus of the post-colonial intellectual was in crisis, often residing at the epicentre of new forms of global capitalism with different forms of localised oppression and injustice. At the time of the interviews, few of the interviewees held permanent academic posts at universities or research institutions in their host societies while the majority were driven into precarious employment and depended on NGO grants to fund individual projects.

Analogously, on 11 January 2016, an informal group of pro-peace academics and researchers in Turkey, Academics for Peace (AFP), released a public petition entitled 'We will not be a party to this crime!'. The petition demanded an immediate end to the 'deliberate massacre and deportation of Kurdish and other people' and to initiate negotiations that would lead to a lasting peace that addresses the demands of the Kurdish political movement. Initially signed by 1128 academics from Turkey, the petition was eventually submitted to the Parliament with a total of 2212 signatures. The Turkish authorities were outraged by the petition and President

Erdoğan accused its signatories of supporting terrorist propaganda, framing the petition as an act of violence (Butler, 2020) and calling on public prosecutors and university administrators to take action against them, including immediate dismissal, detainment, and prosecution on charges of terrorism. As a result, many universities denounced the petition and initiated disciplinary measures against signatories within their institutions. Several signatories were detained by the police and many more publicly threatened and individually harassed (Bahar et al., 2017). Essentially, the signatories were condemned to ‘civic death’ (Özatalay, 2020) and many fled the country only to be forced into states of academic and economic precarity, often leading highly nomadic and uneven academic and personal lives. Some have obtained posts at universities, some work in poorly paid posts in areas of research that are outside their expertise or are in poorly funded temporary posts without any hope of permanence, and many are unemployed altogether.

The Scholar and the Figure of the Intellectual in ‘Crisis’

Much ink has been spilt on understanding the nature of intellectual labour within and outside the academy, contrasting models of intellectual life in higher education institutions with the less structured spaces of the ‘free floating intellectuals’. For example, we might consider Edward Said who advocates a certain ‘amateurism in intellectual life’, one which involves keeping a distance from institutional bodies for the sake of meaningful politics, that is, political expression and activity that is not constrained by the consideration of one’s institutional affiliation nor foreclosed by states of emergency and crisis (see Honig, 2009 on ‘emergency politics’). By contrast, we could also consider Stuart Hall, who whilst agreeing with Said’s notion of intellectual life as a vocation in which one must ‘speak truth to power’ also defends the academy as a place for intellectual thinking including, potentially, critical intellectual and political work.

A third consideration is an intellectual labour informed by more explicit political and values-based movements, sometimes possessing radical tendencies. It differs from both Said’s ‘amateurism’ and from Hall’s political commitment to the academy, in that it situates knowledge-making within a political movement and calls for a ‘radical immanence’ designed to challenge sovereign power and its biopolitical governing regimes, within a wider field of political struggle. Although this latter form of labour remains a persistent optic in the sociology of intellectuals, its subject, the scholar-activist, or ‘scholactivist’, strives to move beyond the public intellectual’s role of offering commentary on issues of public interest or making academic knowledge accessible and relevant to the public. Instead, they actively engage in specific political movements merging knowledge production and political praxis as resistance to normative tendencies associated with nation-building or populist pressures (see Eyerman & Jamison, 1991 for the notion of movement intellectuals).

These deliberations on intellectual labour have traditionally resided in three separate literatures: the sociology of intellectuals which focuses on what has been referred to, contestably since the 1980s, as ‘public intellectualism’; the sociology of higher

education which has traditionally focused on academics working within institutions of higher education with less emphasis on the politics and sociologies of their knowledge production or much concern with political crises as part of HE; and the literature on the ‘scholactivist’ which moves beyond the idea of ‘public intellectualism’ towards a notion of intellectual labour ‘born out of struggle’ (Stovall, 2016).

The separation, and the relationship, between these three broad genres of knowledge production and their somewhat siloed literatures needs disentanglement. While this paper does not attempt any systematic approach to this task, it can be seen as a contribution to such a line of inquiry. It also offers a case study of the complexity of the crises faced by the post-colonial scholar in exile, even if such crises are overdetermined and therefore not fully comprehensible through one avenue of investigation.

Many Turkish and Syrian scholars whom we interviewed were facing personal or professional ‘crises’ resulting from threats to their ability to reconcile their aspired role as critical intellectuals – that is, their political commitments and convictions – with the need for stability and their careers as academics or scholars: those who ‘spoke truth to power’ risked their jobs, homes, freedoms, and sometimes their lives, while those who opted for a more prudent approach suffered the pains of cognitive dissonance, the humiliations of silence in the face of atrocity, and sometimes an existential crisis of meaning (Al Azmeh, 2021a). When fleeing the country was presented as a solution for persecuted critical intellectuals, their commitment to a critical political role was often likewise undermined, either by the restrictive powers of the bureaucratic and neo liberalised academy – what Mbembe (2019b) refers to as self-institution and self-limitation – or by a traumatised loss of faith in political agency.

It is this concept of the critical intellectual in a state of ‘crisis’ or without a form of critique that allows scholars to see what they might be forced to become or turn into, to invoke Balibar, that we are concerned with. In his article ‘Critique in the twenty-first century’, Balibar (2016, p. 11) writes:

We don’t embark on this examination from an abstract or timeless perspective but caught up in the middle of a conjuncture that we are all trying to understand. What are its tendencies and conflictual stakes? What alternatives does it present? From the place where we find ourselves, we try to assess the characteristic features of this conjuncture [within HE as part of modern state making and transnational pressures] [...] to understand how the current situation must change critique, conceived as an analysis of ‘what we are’, as Foucault used to say – which in reality means an analysis of what we are becoming, or turning into, one that cannot prescribe its culmination in advance ... we need to recast critique in order to provide a diagnosis of the present.

We look particularly at constructs such as crisis, complicity, institutionalisation, and praxis, all of which have been so central to the study of intellectuals, in contexts where displacement from the academy (and/or from the nation-state) have interrupted institutionalised modes of intellectual labour. This interruption seems to empower alternative modes of knowledge production and political subjectivity through varied creative means. But it can also create a loss of meaning, and impasses of purposive thinking that make discourses of perseverance and resistance

(for example in the discourse of decolonial trauma theory, see Visser, 2015) seem utopic, obstinate, or performative.

On Moral Authority and the Task of Critique

We begin our analysis by exploring how intellectual labour can sometimes emerge as a challenge to centralised sovereign authority. In so doing, we engage in broad genealogical thinking in light of our participants' insistence on performing a critical intellectualism under authoritarianism. For example, we might ask Nietzsche's time-honoured question about morality in relation to intellectual labour: if 'good', according to Nietzsche, is that which 'heightens the feeling of power, will to power and power itself', then in what ways and to what extent is the moral authority of intellectuals itself a form of power, even as it seeks to resist machinations of sovereign authority? Indeed, why do intellectuals in authoritarian contexts still take such high risks in the realm of political life and in the name of their intellectual responsibility and authority? How do they reflect on and act against both their persecution in authoritarian contexts and their 'co-optation' in the Western academy? In envisioning and bearing the historical arc of systemic harm, do they or can they challenge the reproduction of social inequalities and the normative gesturing of liberal and advanced neo-liberal political regimes that draw them into circles of complicity or what Mbembe (2021) refers to as 'compensatory discourse'? And what new language or new questions can they offer to challenge these logics and the structural and symbolic violence that sustains them? How can their narrations of the past and present help us overcome 'the tragedy of colonial enlightenment' (Scott, 2004)? And what are the political and epistemological implications of such narrations? It is with these questions in mind that intellectual labour can be seen as a 'problem space' (Scott, 2004, p. 4) – a space of dispute, contestation, contradiction, rupture, and rival views where new historical conditions make old questions, narratives, and constructs 'not so much wrong as irrelevant'.

In her paper titled *Moral Authority and the Academy Under Attack*, Buckner (2023) suggests that a central basis of Turkish academics' resistance towards increasing neo-liberal authoritarianism at their universities was a sense of 'moral authority' associated with their profession as autonomous scholars in the public realm. The concept of 'moral authority' is well rehearsed in the sociology of intellectuals, and while it may sometimes represent political narratives of the state, it often gravitates towards, or formulates, critical sites of resistance to political power. In the context of Turkey, both the conservative populist intellectuals of the ruling Justice and Development party (AKP) and the critical intellectuals of the Academics for Peace (AFP) movement have drawn on and performed some form of 'moral' authority to address diverse publics and audiences (Buckner, 2022; Gürpınar, 2020). Similar dynamics are present in the Syrian context where Baathist journalists and academics make claims to a perceived moral authority and do so no less than dissident intellectuals to speak against corruption and dictatorship, often on behalf of the subjugated masses.

Leaving aside the potentially contradictory notion of regime intellectuals and focusing instead on the self-positioning of dissident intellectuals, we find that the 'moral authority' that compels public intellectuals under authoritarianism to speak

up is connected to the figure of the critical intellectual or the *intellectuel engagé* (Sartre, 1949) as evolved during the second half of the twentieth century. The language of the ‘political’ typically associated with this figure tends to represent critical anti-imperialist ruptures in twentieth-century thought which sought to challenge the idea of the homogenous state, its machinations of power, and its ‘states of exception’ and exclusion (for examples, see Beauvoir, 2018[1947]; Agamben, 2003; Arendt, 1987). In this case, the *intellectuel engagé* represents an emergent property of post-war critiques of ‘new states’ (Pinto, 2009), and therefore much dissident intellectualism was informed by anti-state discourses designed to challenge political complicity in colonial oppression and in a post-war moment of atrocity and genocide. We might consider, for example, Fanon’s (1968) critique of the colonised intellectual; Mahdi Amel’s (1990) theory of the colonial mode of production; and Arendt’s (2017[1951]) or Bauman’s (2016) critiques of bio-technological regimes of dehumanisation seen to emerge out of elite knowledge production in the name of the university and its ‘truth claims’ or ‘scientific discourses’ – discourses that consolidated state governing strategies and the making of ‘states of exception’ (see Dragos, 2020; Yaqoob, 2014).

Turkish and Syrian Academics in Exile: Political Figurations of Critical Intellectualism and Scott’s Problem-space

Like public intellectuals, academics, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, situate themselves and their professional identities within discourses that have performative components and enact well-rehearsed repertoires. As Foucault reminds us, to become ‘subjects’ we must ‘be subjected’ to discourses which speak of us, and without which we cannot speak (as cited in Ponzanesi, 2021). Discourse on public intellectualism formulates it as a political subjectivity and a professional identity in which ‘the responsibility of the intellectual’ is to expose and subvert the machinations of power (Chomsky, 2017); to ‘speak truth to power’ (Said, 1996[1993]); and to be ‘disturbed by, and ... analyse so as to transform, systems and structures of power, of injustices, of inequality, which are generated by forces that one does not fully understand and whose consequences one therefore cannot fully estimate and whom one cannot therefore effectively resist’ (Hall, 2007, p. 321).

Many of the interviews we conducted resonate with these figurations of the intellectual. In formulating their political subjectivities and organising their intellectual labour, interviewees positioned themselves as opponents to sovereign power and its regimes of violence. For example, when asked about her views on the relationship between higher education and crises, one Turkish exiled academic told us,

this is a really crucial topic for me ... I think for all academics or researchers: this is the issue that has [the most] impact on our lives, it is not unique to authoritarian countries. It is everywhere that there is a problem ... we cannot separate an isolated realm of knowledge from power and power relations. Because of that, we see this pressure from governments everywhere. (interviewee T4, personal communication, 2021)

Similarly, interviews with exiled Syrian academics revealed the view that the critical responsibility of intellectuals is ‘substantial’ – ‘not only because they have a platform but also because they have symbolic power and influence’ (interviewee S3, personal communication, 2018). Reflecting an imaginary that drives this sense of responsibility and authority against a position of complicity and non-action, this participant adds: ‘the public expects them [the intellectuals] to take a stance because they have influence. When they fail to take a position, that is a position... A person with symbolic power who does not take a position vis-à-vis oppression for example is taking a position in support of oppression.’

Arguably, this understanding of public intellectualism is today a problem space in as much as the intellectual stumbles as they seek to create novel political positions and knowledge-making practices that must necessarily bridge both critical contemplation over crises – manufactured and managed crises in the form that Honig (2009) refers to as ‘emergency politics’ – and natal action in the Arendtian sense of acting in concert with others beyond naïve or socialised bureaucratic complicity and into a world of energised natality animated by the human capacity for new action.

In consideration of this bridging of contemplation and action, the exilic intellectual might offer figurations to shift registers of resistance in the academy from imaginaries of moral responsibility and authority to more contextualised and situational figurations such as that of the ‘cartographer’ of knowledge, power, and resistance (Braidotti, 2021) or that of the radical historiographer of nation and culture. And while we agree with Braidotti that ‘postcolonial intellectuals’ of this kind have an important, inspiring, even instructive, role to play as ‘practical thinkers, devoted to social justice and connected to the real world’ (Braidotti, 2021, p.531), our data provides insight into the many constraints that undermine their capacity, both at home and in exile, to intervene or be interventionist in their practice. This is largely the case because the power formations, and relations of domination and subordination that have been condensed in a conjunctural rupture of the intellectual are undermining their resources for progressive action in both the authoritarian and nominally democratic space.

One such contradiction was reported by a Turkish academic in exile who told us that ‘when a government endorses the idea that any knowledge-making in higher education that violates the new Islamic state’s conditions of legitimacy [in relation to the Kurdish question], then the scholars themselves represent a stance against Turkey, suggesting we are akin to ... terrorists’ (interviewee T12 personal communication, 2022). This participant went on to elaborate why challenging this view was the political responsibility of the scholar – ‘if we do not challenge this view, it is the end of human life in its best form ... that is the biggest crisis of all ... in fact it is already happening.’ Here, we can see a resonance with Said (1996[1993], p. 54) image of the dissident intellectual as ‘sifting through the debris of colonialism and post-colonialism’ reflecting endlessly on the cruelty and genocidal tendencies of sovereign spaces and focusing instead on ‘what could not be regimented in the totally administered society’ (p.55).

Pundits of Benign Critique

As Honig (2009) argues, exile here emerges as a function of ‘emergency politics’ – the moment when meaningful politics ends and where autocratic regimes invoke the language of terror, risk, and violence to manufacture crises that must be rectified through ‘states of exception’ and new moral orders (see also Butler, 2020). And exile is neither the only nor the most painful possible ‘cost of contention’ critical intellectuals have to pay in such states of exception.

It is because these forms of intellectual dissidence come at a remarkably high price in authoritarian contexts, such as Syria and Turkey, that one might argue that the figuration of the critical intellectual is increasingly threatened under regimes of autocratic surveillance. While it is crucial to recognise the incredibly brave and creative ways in which monitored scholars and intellectuals continue to make dangerous critical intervention,¹ much of this work is happening outside of the university where critical work is generally a rare exception. When it does exist, it might arguably represent an ineffectual and benign politics that serves the state and its own governing interventions into the academy sometimes as an oppositional platform of defensive public expression. For example, a Turkish scholar we interviewed describes a type of oppositional intellectual or ‘pundit’ who practices a ‘defensive politics’ with unremarkable impact or is deemed irrelevant to authoritarian leadership and therefore unworthy of persecution. This type of critic is highly tolerated by the authoritarian regime, we are told.

I don’t think they [the authorities] particularly care [about this type of critic]. I mean they can, but I think they might be seeing those figures as ... somewhat useful, because they are, like, almost helping people to vent. It’s really not leading to any discernible action from the opposition’s point of view, like, they talk and they talk, but nothing comes out from their commentary because they’re more like pundits, they’re not influencers or opinion leaders ... it’s an interesting point of view, to see how superficial things can be. But it’s a time of post-truth as well, so your presence and your verbal skills are more important than the content or the real potential for change. (Interviewee T9, personal communication, 2022)

With the intellectual’s mission of critique stifled under dictatorships, the possibility of meaningful politics is thwarted except under conditions of exile. But as we discuss, working in the academy in exile presents its own impasses to critique, which are of a softer but sometimes more sinister nature. They are the focus of the next section.

¹ For decades, intellectuals and activists under authoritarian regimes have navigated critical work through literary techniques and devices; through anonymity, sometimes dedicating entire careers to unrecognised and unrewarded intellectual labour under a pseudonym; and through courageous confrontations which they have all too often paid for with their freedoms, their homes, their safety and sometimes their lives.

Conscripts of Modernity

Our interviews have shown that scholars and intellectuals face serious obstacles when trying to carry the task of critique with them into exile. For example, one such challenge is the socialised bureaucratisation and new managerial figurations of the university now running within an entrepreneurial model that is focused on the quantity of research output, the ability to generate money through research funding, and the ability to maximise teaching efficiency generally measured by student numbers. This often means that the very idea of critique is obfuscated through soft forms of biopower (or modulation) inside university walls – here the scholar represents a site for administration and bureaucratisation or globally regulated norms of intellectual labour or private capitalist interests. Indeed, critical intellectualism and critique itself become what Scott (2004) names ‘**Conscripts of Modernity**’ – scholars of the late modern moment conscripted into forms of academic labour that do not engage in novel critique or questions, fail to address ‘perineal post-colonial dilemmas’, or undermine the university as a space of ‘radical hospitality’ (Mbembe, 2019b, p. 239). For example, interviewee T8, a Turkish academic working in the UK, and one of many who were forced to resign from their Turkish universities, noted that her interest in research could not be fulfilled through the funding-focused model available in UK universities and consequently she has abandoned the expectation of following a planned career trajectory of academic promotion. She has instead replaced research as a venue for contributing to the betterment of society with a private consultancy that helps vulnerable individuals ‘in more direct ways’. She says, ‘I think all these expectations and pressures around funding are killing, not killing but decreasing, my curiosity as a researcher ... to be honest I changed my mind about how I see my future career’.

Mbembe (2019a) refers to such institutional ‘killing’ as a form of necropolitics which takes place in spaces of sovereignty: ‘that domain of life over which power has taken control’. Drawing on Mbembe’s necropolitics, we might therefore understand such disillusionment with research careers as a consequence ‘of the overreliance, under late capitalism, on modes of production of knowledge that take for facts only that which can be measured and experimented with’ (Mbembe, 2019a, p. 109). This tendency, he argues, has escalated since the second half of the twentieth century resulting in an ‘impoverishment of the real’ to a point that today ‘knowledge is increasingly defined as knowledge for the market’ (ibid) and the privatisation of knowledge, which in turn has become the primary mechanism for the validation of truth.

Interviewee T9, also a Turkish academic currently working in the UK, gives us quite an exacting picture of Mbembe’s biopolitics, having recently made the difficult decision to leave academia. He told us that,

People feel that jobs in academia are not sustainable, they are not fulfilling, and that’s something I contemplated a lot... I had to make a decision: do I go for a fellowship which means grant writing and getting a couple million pounds and going for applications which are highly competitive? And then I felt, you know, after that, you need to do that for pretty much the rest of your life. And I’ve seen

senior academics in my field doing research, but 80% of their time is spent with grant writing, which is not the most appealing aspect of research for me. I think this resonates with most people, you know, the sheer volume of target-focus, and not really leaving time for reflection, and pushing always for more: more money, more students, more income. I think this cycle makes academia less appealing for many people and I think it's quite evident from the numbers. People are leaving academia in droves in their early career as well as later stages ... so yes, I think those sorts of problems tell me that the current model is not working ... there is definitely a kind of more consumer-led culture everywhere and I think academia is also suffering from that, so there are really reasonable calls for a slower science (personal communication, 2022).

This same scholar experienced another kind of necropolitical death when, following the coup attempt in 2016, he was privately asked by a high ranking official at the Higher Education Council to resign his post as assistant professor at his university in Turkey 'because lots of academics were subject to terrorism charges' and it was deemed 'the best thing to do' particularly given 'the severity of the conflict which meant that ... both sides started accusing each other' (interviewee T9, personal communication, 2022).

Interviewee T6 describes how academics in Turkey who withdrew from critiquing the state are 'dying inside ... but they say they are innovative and forward thinking through their private ventures'. This interviewee observes that 'there are elements of this going on here too [in Europe] which is talked about as freedom to research. But who can do that?', he questions (personal communication, 2022).

As these interviews and others tell us, intellectual labour may claim it operates in a neutral space of innovation and progress, but it must do so by subscribing to triumphant narratives that uphold existing hierarchies of privilege, influence, and access. Interviewee T6 further elaborated: 'equality is a language of the university in name only. If you are tied up in bureaucracy, you can't be free or equal – you just keep writing grants and running for the university, so the university's reputational status remains – even if you are the precariat'.

In Syria, where exile resulted in a dramatic shift from a fully immersive praxis-based form of engagement to a situation of loss and hopeless disenchantment felt more pervasive and injurious. Interviewee S4 recounts,

I used to have enormous energy for work. Now [in exile] I feel as though I am fooling myself. I want to do this work, but I don't know if it's for me or even for the public good. What I am certain of is that neither my work nor that of anyone else has changed anything beyond a little impact on public opinion which could not rescue one single house from shelling, one person from being killed, or one prisoner from incarceration. This is the source of my sense of futility... I don't really know why I continue to work. I ask myself this question from time to time... After all these years I have learnt that the reality of politics is an entirely other thing that has nothing to do with anything we were trying to do.

It is amid these aporias that intellectuals find themselves in a state of ‘crisis’ without a form of critique that might allow them to envision what they are being forced ‘to become or turn into’ to recall Balibar (2016). Here, fragments from a history of atrocity and unspeakable harm – including the devastation of being unable to ‘rescue ... one person from being killed’ – underscore the paradoxes faced by critical intellectuals as they strive to sustain human life and the promise of politics in the ‘disorderly world of political conflicts’ (Gilroy, 2000, p. 105). The bureaucratic machinations of academic life and the remaking of intellectual labour under the guise of private interests has provided a uniquely insular ‘implosive turn that brings the difficult task of politics to an end by making them appear irrelevant in the face of deeper, more fundamental powers that regulate human conduct’ (Gilroy, 2000., p. 105). In such contexts, the scholar is retooled and repurposed by crude academic managerialisms suffused with a substantive sense of futility. Where then does this leave us within the realm of the ‘problem space’ of the critical intellectual? And how might the experience of academic exile make new and meaningful modalities of education and knowledge production possible?

Exile as a Space of Becoming

The exile of Syria’s academics and intellectuals and the purge of critical academics in Turkey offer some helpful cases for exploring the crisis of critique and for understanding the restrictive impact of HEIs on intellectual labour as it relates to the figure of the critical intellectual. However, and at the risk of romanticising the grave injustice of forced displacement, we believe that by deterritorialising the prescriptive tropes of academic life and ossified or taken for granted educational spaces, exile can also open spaces of becoming whose potentialities are yet to be fully explored. For example, the recent purges of critical intellectuals from Turkish universities and the mass exile of Syria’s dissident intellectuals have created the conditions, at least in part and for some, for a *becoming exilic* in Said’s sense of the ‘intellectual in exile’.

Said (1996[1993], pp. 28–29) describes the intellectual in exile as one ‘who because of exile cannot, or more to the point, will not make the adjustment, preferring instead to remain outside the mainstream’. Turkey’s and Syria’s purged intellectuals can be seen as potential Saidian ‘intellectuals-in-exile’ in the sense that the historic circumstance of the purges have permitted an estrangement from institutionalised modalities of intellectual and political labour, and enabled alternative forms of knowledge production ‘outside the mainstream’ (ibid). For Said (1993, p. 116), an exilic displacement means that ‘you are always going to be marginal, and that what you do as an intellectual has to be made up because you cannot follow a prescribed path’. Indeed, when our research participants found themselves outside their pre-imagined and preconfigured academic or intellectual career tracks, they became ‘exiles so far as privileges, power, and honors are concerned ... never being fully adjusted, always feeling outside the chatty, familiar world inhabited by natives, so to speak... Exile for the intellectual in this metaphysical sense is restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled, and unsettling others’ (Said, 1993, p. 116).

Alongside this generative marginality, it does seem remarkable that interrupted modes of knowledge production and dissemination were replaced with new innovative ones. In the context of Turkey, for example, Aktas et al. (2019) show that following the purges, ‘critical academic discussions have instead moved from the universities to alternative, underground academies. Lectures and seminars are given in these “street academies” or “solidarity academies” and new forums for publication – both alternative publishers and journals – are being established’.² Similar attempts at building alternative knowledge making entities emerged in North-eastern Syria after the independence of those regions from regime control during the Syrian War. In an interview during the symposium ‘Democratic, Free University and Educational Models’ held at Rojava University in Qamishli in April 2018, the late Anthropologist David Graeber, who had travelled several times to the region and took a keen interest in the educational models being developed there, described the educational system of Rojava University as ‘a rebirth of education’ (ANF News, 2018). Such innovative approaches emerging from the grave injustices of the Turkish and Syrian purges offer some hope that disassociation from institutionalised and co-opted academic structures can make room for alternative conditions of knowledge production to evolve; conditions that are, to refer to Said’s figuration, ‘outside the mainstream, unaccommodated, un-co-opted, resistant’ (1996[1993], p. 113). These instances might stand in for freedoms operating outside a monopoly of force, whether it is legally sanctioned authoritarian violence or symbolic violence (e.g. advanced privatisation). These practices appeared to stand outside an image of a self-possessed subject of liberal rights and freedoms in the Western academy, where the ‘wars of subjectivity’ reign (see Brown, 1995, 46) and the imperial past is masked through techniques of self-privatisation, vocabularies of self-description and ‘self-mastery’ (Rose, 1999).

Another highly significant and historically symbolic outcome of such exteriority is that it allows the intellectual to interpolate intergenerational patterns of colonial or sovereign violence and to resist the eradication of silenced or minoritarian collective memory in authoritarian spaces. As our empirical work shows, scholars in exile were able to invoke buried memories, life stories, and suppressed politico-historical narratives about crisis in their respective sites. By highlighting their subordinated ‘epistemic positioning’ (Bacevic, 2021) in the context of ‘competitive memory’ (Rothberg, 2009), they were able to both re-represent and guard a counter memory: a political consciousness in which they both implicate themselves in wider political realities and move past complicity. Exile therefore sometimes represented a double-consciousness where a politics of freedom stood against the concept of the liberal individual and invoked its opposite – collective historical responsibility. In the Turkish case study fieldwork, this manifested in speaking out against the AKP’s domestic and foreign policy, notably its expansionist imperialism, and consequently being expelled from their Turkish university or from Turkey altogether. Interviewee T3, a signatory of the Academics for Peace petition, for example, described that:

² This form of exile can be understood as metaphorical exile from the academy or ‘internal exile’ (Sertdemir Özdemir, 2021b) where no exile in the literal sense of the word has occurred.

In August 2016 there was a Turkish incursion into Jarabulus in Syria, and I was called by a journalist of a daily newspaper with the request whether I can give an interview from the perspective of international relations about this incursion, its consequences, and its dynamics. I was actually very aware of the fact that it would be very difficult ... [I discussed this with my partner] and we decided to ... give the interview... I was very careful in terms of choosing my concept and so on. It was actually a very balanced interview ... my main point was to say you cannot reach security through expansion, so the Kurdish problem has its roots in Turkey, and you cannot solve it through expansionist policy, it would augment the problem, it will make it worse, this was my main idea. Three hours after the publication of this interview I was called by the university administration... I went to the university, and they gave me a letter with the order for my suspension ... with clear emphasis on the content of this interview ... undermining the Turkish state and support of terrorism. There was nothing [in the interview] that you can construe or interpret as support of terrorism. It was very academic, really, ... because I was very careful, because I know which consequence will arise from that, and yes, I was suspended... I was then dismissed you know as per the emergency decree [following the 2016 coup] ... [Shortly after,] the overall situation got much worse, they started to arrest politicians and many opposition leaders and ... we decided to leave the country.

Later in the same interview, this participant described the precarity of his working conditions following these events, requiring him to move from one university to the next in short-term employment contracts lasting from one semester to 6 months. He describes this period as one of the most productive in his career, particularly in terms of research including memory work.

Another Turkish participant, challenging the values of political sovereignty and nationalist nostalgia remarked that.

it is one thing to love your home and it is another to love your nation – once these two things are conflated, we are stuck, and it is so easy to get stuck here in our nostalgia of a place we didn't really know until it tore us apart ... this is what the autocrat wants. Is this why we went to university? I don't think so – so we could swallow it? But when I realised ... no one is the nation – only the institution [is], who then suggests we lie, or they lie to us. So why rely on Turkey as a base for creating something new. All knowledge and its sadness needs to connect; and it happened when I realised, I didn't lose Turkey but it lost me.

Similarly, in Syria, voicing a politico-historical narrative that countered or unsettled state sanctioned narratives and regime propaganda was central to interviewees' understanding of their role. In our interview, an exiled Syrian academic placed the centrality of the role of exiled dissident intellectuals as guardians of counter-memories of revolution and war within the broader framework of the 'responsibility of the intellectuals'.

We are accountable towards people for letting them know what happened and how it happened so that they might comprehend it positively. Because it was the fruit of immense suffering. But they must put that suffering in a broader and more encouraging context ... so that instead of becoming victims of that experience, it may become a steppingstone from which they can move to the next one – to comprehend the pain instead of drowning in it or being crushed by it. (Interviewee S6, personal communication, 2018)

Such remarks are akin to Arendt's reflection on the poetic sensibilities associated with a critical intellectual stance on sovereignty through memory. Arendt's revelations can be found in her references to the poet Isak Dinesen, who wrote that 'all sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them' (cited in Arendt, 1968, p. 257). Here, the significance of Dinesen for Arendt is his ability to invoke a notion of loss that ignites the praxis of storytelling so central to Arendt's conception of social freedoms. These are neither liberal freedoms nor freedoms mobilised by anti-western sentiments, both often used, paradoxically, to re-assert sovereign power. Rather, these are political freedoms that invoke a collective responsibility past, present, and future; for as Arendt (1968, p. 186) reminds us, 'education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new [...], would be inevitable.'

Such storytelling also illuminates the power of intellectual life beyond the institutional confines of the authoritarian and the neo-liberal academy since embracing an exilic positionality demands that a story beyond institutional authority be borne. In this way, the reasoned academy might be seen as a site of mourning where those intellectuals who remain long for the very thing they may have inadvertently, or consciously, participated in destroying. One such example of this is the 'free speech' debate that is both construed as a progressive concern with freedom of expression yet simultaneously represents a right-wing trope to attack no-platforming and 'political correctness' or to emphasise the neoliberalisation of HE and the 'progressive neo-liberal' in the name of free market regulation (Fraser, 2017; Dillabough, 2022). A particularly sinister liberal manifestation of this are cases where supposedly emancipatory movements (e.g. white-washed EDI, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion) or academic practice further an apolitical neutralisation of an already ineffectual academy. Renato Rosaldo (1993) refers to this phenomenon as 'innocent yearning', where academics draw substantially upon liberal languages to represent an object of nostalgia in ways that intensify their complicity. One of our Turkish participants recognised similar patterns of 'innocent yearning' amongst his colleagues who conflate critique with treason or anti-nationalism:

it was just getting more and more obvious that university life as a space of ideas in Turkey was dead or dying a rapid death ... even my old friends who want to say that I do not stand for Turkey [for being critical of state violence] are silenced or imprisoned ... all this stuff about 'the real Turkey' – as if there ever was such a thing ... (Interviewee T6, personal communication, 2022)

In Syria, research participants were also committed to redemptive storytelling or to speaking their truth about injustice in their country. They were severely punished for this commitment, sometimes for mere unwillingness to publicly endorse the state's narrative. Some participants fled after being subjected to political incarceration and torture as a result of such storytelling. Others left to avoid being coerced into contributing publicly to state propaganda. And while their exile may have forced them outside activist spaces within Syria, it sometimes opened up new transnational spaces for political subjectivities that were previously invisible or impossible including a central role in contributing to counter memories of revolution and war and to the process of cultural trauma construction surrounding the Syrian event of 2011.

As argued elsewhere (Al Azmeh, 2021b), lack of employment opportunities and a general resistance to the idea of integration gestured these intellectuals towards a positionality that, unsettled and unsettling as it may be, bore the promise of politics and its potentialities. These included resituating the task of critic within broader frameworks and through transitional or post-national networks where resistance was aimed at dispersed, and therefore often illusive, structures of power but where networks and repertoires of resistance were also more established. For some, this involved continuing local struggles through transnational networks:

Some of us have gained access to networks of activism in the West, in academia and other places... We are still in the beginning, but I think it's a process that will ultimately have an impact... Today we are in a better position to build a Syrian cause using cultural and legal tools. There have been valuable efforts in this regard, especially by using the tools of culture, art and thought. I expect that in the next few years the Syrian youth will be able to take the Syrian cause into global discussion, similar to what happened with the Palestinian cause. (Interviewee S2, personal communication, 2018)

For others, the cause itself became transnational or post-national. This interviewee, also from Syria, views the task of critique as one of fulfilment of our human essence and our need for human connection. She says,

to me the question is bigger... It is part of a broader human connection with others ... there is a genuine desire for change everywhere. We are part of it. Syria is part of this world. This isn't about Syria being my country and wanting to go back there and sing the national anthem in tears, no! ... Capitalism is a killer... Being human is being a thinking, creating, evolving form of life. Our species likes happiness, progress, and achievement. We are intelligent creatures always looking forward, looking for alternatives. (Interviewee S5, personal communication, 2018)

Such accounts reflect growing tensions between the exiled intellectuals, the reasoned academy, and the idea of the sovereign state. And while this tension is not entirely novel, it manifests in increasingly blatant, even aggressive, ways. As early as the mid-twentieth century, Arendt sought in 'The Origins of Totalitarianism' to demonstrate how eugenics, race science, and totalitarianism (the imperial blueprint) energised fear, banal bureaucrats, and political complicity inside

the academy and amongst intellectuals thereby eradicating all forms of historical consciousness – as ‘the center of politics’ (Arendt, 2005). This led to a failure in posing significant questions about critical intellectualism and political life: ‘What is politics? Who is a political being? What is freedom?’ (2005, p. 433). Post-war normative historians and sociologists, she argued, might grasp some ‘world-historical events’ or ‘facts’ or study systems or even nation-building, but they failed to examine the political character of the ‘world’ in their own time. In this way, Arendt sought to link modern knowledge-making and the language of expertise with the growth of authoritarian political imaginaries, where states of exception replaced the idea of worldliness and the thinking human (see Yaqoob, 2014). Academic life dominated by the sheer ‘monotony of the uniformity of a society based upon mass-production’ (Arendt, 2005, p. 418) can be understood in the specific context of power where the race towards national innovation and state protection set the terms and conditions of academic life – including an emergency politics and its associated contradictions for those intellectuals seeking to ‘speak truth to power’ and pose new questions and lines of analysis for a new post-colonial moment yet to come.

As global interaction widens, academics and intellectuals in peripheral contexts, displaced by political crises, can signal the fading of intellectual figurations and traditions that have outlived their relevance. Yet, as this study’s participants’ narratives show, their pre-exile activism as well as the experience of exile itself can unsettle hegemonic notions of belonging, nationhood, and politics, and arguably transform knowledge production both in terms of what the critical intellectual is and can be. Yet, exilic scholars were also acutely aware that ‘liberal rule’ is highly dependent upon the advancing relationship between the authorial calculations of the increasingly privatised scholar and the aspirations of ‘free citizens’. Isin’s (2002) notions of colonial government are poignant here where ‘liberal’ governments stress the significance of ‘governing at a distance’, instrumentalising the scholar as a form of authority and power in the market.

It is for these reasons that we cannot know whether the contemporary Syrian and Turkish academics in exile that we interviewed will influence intellectual traditions beyond their own. Earlier waves of exile have done so: Hannah Arendt’s early ground-breaking critique of nation-building and her work on the rights of refugees and its impact on deliberative democracy, human rights discourse, and policy; Edward Said’s inception of the field of postcolonial theory through his critique of orientalism; Spivak’s concern with the idea of a novel subaltern scholar and her contributions to contemporary debates calling upon new modalities of intellectual labour. It will be some time before any such contribution by more recent waves of exile can become discernible, but it would seem that understanding the figure of the critical intellectual as a ‘problem space’ is key for comprehending the changing roles and potentialities of the intellectual in exile in times of widening and horizontalizing digital communications, growing populism, and rising authoritarianism.

Conclusion

In this paper, we echoed scholarship that believes the task of critique is in a state of crisis and that this crisis is reconstituting the critical intellectual, and public intellectualism more broadly, as a problem space that demands urgent redefinition but that is also collecting incredible potentialities. For exiled intellectuals, this manifests itself in a situation where domestically located critique is thwarted by persecution under authoritarian regimes, often leading to exile. And while exile offers opportunities for occupying what Said construes as an aspirational positionality of ‘intellectual amateurism’ typified in his figure of the ‘intellectual in exile’, it also presents serious challenges that need to be addressed more honestly. One of these challenges is the remaking of the academy in the name of reason and freedom (including market freedoms) which has laid it open to a neoliberal market economy of bureaucratised competition over resources thus fostering what Nancy Fraser (2017) refers to as the ‘progressive neo-liberal’ scholar. Such transformations subject scholars to ‘self-institutionalisation’ and ‘self-limitation’ (Mbembe, 2003), a phenomenon that directly thwarts the possibility of meaningful critique. It also seems to be alienating many thinkers including exiled academics, purging them once again, this time by ‘the invisible hand of the market’, from the university.

And while such double exile hypothetically makes possible what Edward Said valorises as ‘the intellectual in exile’, well positioned to innovate new modes of knowledge production and revive the possibility of a meaningful politics, we shed some light on the practical challenges presented by such a positionality in the modern university – challenges which make Said’s argument seem idealistic and disconnected from these scholars’ lived reality. In crassly direct terms: who sponsors such intellectual labour, who pays the bills? Further suspicion is cast of this figuration by the fact that Said valorises the idea of the amateur intellectual in exile having himself been very much tied to (and protected by) an elite university. Azmi Bshara (2017) articulates this critique without explicitly naming Said but very likely targeting him when he argues that.

intellectuals can be exiled externally or internally, or both, whereas most of those who view exile as a condition for the intellectual are themselves university professors who have taken much interest in their own academic promotion putting in the necessary labour and adhering to the rules of university publication to obtain their academic ranks. In other words, they did not act as exiled from or alien to the institution, but very much as part of it. They work within the parameters of a very broad framework made possible by the Western university to develop critical theories that target academic discourse itself. In so doing, they expand the university’s liberalism and capacity to contain that critical theory has become the central discourse for the social sciences in such universities. There is no exile here but pretence and posturing.

In the absence of a clear alternative to Said’s idealistic figuration, we can witness in intellectuals’ double exile a dual brain drain: first from authoritarian countries to liberal or illiberal democracies resulting in the emptying out of authoritarian nations of some of their most valuable intellectual, educational, critical, and political

resources. These same groups frequently move from the transnational academy to other sectors of the economy which often means the eventual abandonment of the task of critique traditionally, at least tentatively, protected by HE and its principles of academic freedom. Such threats to the task of critique sanction the status quo and feed existing power structures and disparities towards formulations which history has shown to be catastrophic.

Indeed, the accounts of the exilic scholars we interviewed tell us that the modern higher education institutions that they find themselves within are losing their capacity to deliberate over their own limitations and reducing the university to the spectacle of 'provider' or to an institutionalised space of patriotism and populist interventions (Martini & Robertson, 2022; Bose et al., [under review](#)). Taken together, these findings suggest that the university is struggling to represent a 'holding environment' (Honig, 2009) necessary for the successful incubation of human politics, making intellectuals' legacy of commitment to the task of critique increasingly untenable – most saliently for not-yet-re-established intellectuals trying to pick up their lives and careers in exile.

Such untenable commitments, often entangled with nomadic precarity, are creating ruptures within critical intellectualism turning it into a 'problem space' that calls for new questions and frames of understanding (Scott, 2004). Yet, these tensions do not completely undermine exilic scholars' desire to evade political implication through contributions to counter-hegemonic memory. Rather, their articulation of these challenges reveals some of the underlying dimensions of the crisis itself – that is Hall's conjunctural moment where diverse political, economic, and ideological contradictions operating in society come together to give the figuration of the exilic scholar a specific and distinctive shape. But this crisis of the critical intellectual is necessarily overdetermined because different elements of cultural transformation and conflict are fusing and condensing the conditions for critical inquiry and knowledge production 'after post-coloniality'. We therefore suggest that these scholars, to quote Scott, need a different kind of space to belong to in the university, one that has undergone a radical refashioning from the conditions and figurations currently being negotiated. For if the exilic scholar experiences the university as a 'problem space', then new imaginaries are needed through which to navigate their past and future in relation to the power of the nation-state, post-coloniality, memory, and the role of HE in the face of increasingly populist imaginaries and interventions.

One productive site for the contemplation of the kind of space exilic scholars can belong to within the university has been the digital public sphere. Murphy and Costa (2019) suggest that open-access publicly engaged web-based scholarship has the potential to transform public intellectualism. In reimagining such future transformation, they call for a 'public pedagogy' mediated by the university to present a more sustained and proactive engagement on the part of academics with the digital public sphere. Dallyn et al. (2015) differentiate between two forms of public intellectual currently working from within the university – one an integrated intellectual who works via their senior positions to engage the public, and the other a non-conformist academic who aims to critique the university from within and create networks outside the academy. They argue that both of these types have been hindered by the obsession with journal publication which 'has had significant effects on the nature

of writing, where texts are not so much written with a particular audience in mind as devised for a specialised and limited set of reviewers, whose blessing is integral to the process' (Dallyn et al., 2015, p. 1033). Similarly, Drezner (2009, p. 49) finds that the digital public sphere – more specifically the blogosphere – 'lowers the barriers erected by a professionalized academy... [and] provides a vetting mechanism through which public intellectuals can receive feedback and therefore fulfill their roles more effectively'.

But such arguments discount the limitations that more precarious subjects (like recently exiled intellectuals) have to contend with in trying to make of the digital public sphere an alternative platform for exercising their moral authority/responsibility. Indeed, if, as Habed and Ponzanesi (2018) claim, the study of postcolonial intellectuals is the study of how marginalised groups regain their voice in alternative spheres, to what extent can the digital public sphere be a potential new home for critique that we might point our attention to. Beyond the limitations of time and resources we have already highlighted in this paper and the requirements of surviving in the modern neoliberalised academy, the increased sense of vulnerability that emerges from exile increases anxieties around political, institutional, and social critique making the digital public sphere a perilous site for subaltern critique. Under conditions of post-9/11 transnational cybersecurity and surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019), political critique is also burdened with the fear of exclusion by biometric borders (see also Amoores, 2006) and by concern for the safety of family back home from potential persecution; institutional critique is limited by precarious employment; and social critique is dampened by the desire to belong in an already hostile host environment with a media scene that has already construed their arrival as a 'crisis' (Al Azmeh, 2021b).

Indeed, while the transnational digital public sphere is energised by currents of critique and resistance that hold significant promise, we argue that it remains ill-disposed as an alternative platform for exilic critique as long as it remains colonised by an 'artificial intelligentsia' (Tuzcu, 2021) and 'electronic armies' (Bertram, 2017) tasked with the protection of sovereign power, hegemonic interests, and the reproduction of existing hierarchies of symbolic and physical violence. With this in mind, Said's figuration of 'the intellectual in exile' continues to be untenable to recently exiled intellectuals, and the task of critique remains under threat.

In interrogating the problem space of critical intellectualism through the trials and paradoxes of exiled intellectuals, we have sought to identify some of the political, economic, and ideological forces shaping the current crisis of the exilic intellectual and suggested some new frames for understanding the task of critique as part of the 'public mission' of universities. There remains a need to expand on these frames of understanding and to present ever renewed questions related to the fluxes and flows of such understanding. Future research recommendations emerging from our argument include deepening our understanding of how to move beyond the equation of academic criticism with political and social engagement and the instrumentalisation of benign critique as a source of progressivist legitimisation otherwise largely ineffectual and removed from the lived and the political. To invoke Nancy Fraser, there is a need to challenge the conflation of the critical with the political which necessarily ignores the very real and growing gap between intellectual and political

spheres of knowledge and action and the absence of mechanisms of translation between academe and activism. Importantly, further research is needed to map out how HE can restore those mechanisms in order to reduce the gap between *knowledge* of suffering and action to alleviate it. One way towards this is to continuously question the degree to which forms of critique within the academy are necessarily different degrees of the ‘benign critique’ of the pundit that our participants observe and to interrogate who and what does the intellectual become as a social category and function in a post-mediation era of ‘influencers’ and ‘thought leaders’ where cultural capital and education are less and less relevant to the ability to reach wide audiences and influence opinion. It is still unclear whether there is a meta-role for the critical intellectual to play in our contemporary topography of digital intellectualism, one that can create the epistemic and cultural conditions under which a horizontalisation of critique can be effective. But within this shifting landscape, the scholar is challenged to reconcile the conflict between their sense of ‘moral responsibility’ and their diminishing ‘moral authority’ and to be cognisant of the ways in which such moral authority may be implicated in the advanced bureaucratisation and privatisation of the scholactivist. For the exilic scholar fleeing persecution or violence, there is a further need to challenge the idea of trauma as a ‘source of moral authority, even a kind of expertise’ (Sehgal, 2022) or ‘persecution capital’ (Al Azmeh, 2021b) without denying victims their rightful share of recognition and acknowledgment of their pain.

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Declarations

Research Involving Human Participants and/or Animals Data used in this paper has been collected in compliance with the research ethics of the University of Cambridge (for the Syria data) and of the ESRC (for the Turkey data).

Informed Consent Informed consent has been received from all study participants.

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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Authors and Affiliations

Zeina Al Azmeh¹  · Jo-Anne Dillabough²

✉ Zeina Al Azmeh
za268@cam.ac.uk

Jo-Anne Dillabough
jd217@cam.ac.uk

¹ University of Cambridge Selwyn College, Cambridge, UK

² Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK