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Cultural trauma and the politics of access to higher education in Syria

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ABSTRACT


This paper examines the relationship between the politics of Higher Education access pertaining to longstanding practices of patrimonial authoritarian politics and the narration of collective trauma. Building on an empirical study of Syrian HE during war, we suggest that a *narrative disjuncture* within HEIs has a damaging impact not only upon the educational process, HE reconstruction and reform, but also upon the possibility of social reconciliation. This is especially true when access to education and post-graduation opportunities are directly linked to patrimonial favouritism; widespread social inequalities in access and retention; a violent turn in the purging of oppositional academics; a severely exacerbated brain drain linked to political views; and significantly sparser employment opportunities. Building on the study findings, we show how these challenges are linked to ethico-political positioning vis-à-vis the mass movement of 2011 and related cultural trauma narratives. In closing, we suggest that understanding the relationship between HE access and cultural trauma can inform decision-making on HE reconstruction and future reform.

KEYWORDS

Higher education; Syria; cultural trauma and education; HE under dictatorship; HE and conflict; politics of access to HE

Introduction

In this paper, we explore the relationship between mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in Syrian higher education (HE) as they pertain to longstanding practices of patrimonial authoritarian politics in the context of dissent, war and the narration of collective trauma. In so doing, we argue that higher education in Syria represents a site for the assertion of a grossly constrained narrative about Syria's political history and current affairs, alongside the creation of a purposeful history designed to eliminate dissent and counter-memories of injustice and state violence. The analysis offers insights into what forms of cultural trauma and experiences of inclusion/exclusion can exist within an authoritarian state. Education, as has been shown (see Dillabough, Fimyar, McLaughlin, Al-Azmeh,

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& Jebril, 2018; Dillabough, Fimyar, McLaughlin, Al-Azmeh, et al., 2018; Pardo & Jacobi, 2018), has been one of the primary instruments of bureaucratic manipulation, providing the political foundation for asserting a state-sanctioned national identity and identity management scheme which aims to define the Syrian cultural trauma and formulate political legitimacy in the Syrian state.

It is within this context that we ask about the role of higher education under dictatorship in the process of cultural trauma construction, particularly through the creation of a disjuncture between community narratives of trauma and the narratives of a regime's design over what happened in 2011, who the victims and perpetrators are, and what kinds of memories can be asserted. What we aim to explore is the disjuncture between individual and community narratives enacted by family and intimate friendships (e.g. experiences of ill-treatment by the state) on the one hand, and state-driven approaches enacted through the education system (e.g. heavy use of regime propaganda and militarism in national curricula, patrimonial HE governance and the security apparatus in HE on the other. We take our inspiration from a qualitative study concerned with the status and conditions of Syrian higher education before and after 2011 undertaken in Turkey and Syria (remotely) during 2017 and 2018.

To date, little research is available on the circumstances and conditions of Syria's HE landscape post-2011. In a recently published paper, Milton (2019) showed that, contrary to prevalent media narratives of complete collapse, Syrian higher education has quantitatively survived, but substantial adverse qualitative changes have eroded quality and equity and exacerbated the regime's security control over campuses. For example, in a recent report stemming from our work on HE, conflict and Syria (Dillabough, Fimyar, McLaughlin, Al-Azmeh, & Jebril, 2018), three trends in Syrian HE after 2011 were identified. First, the conflict has heightened the politicisation of HE (both as a precursor to the conflict and an outcome) impacting on its fundamental integrity and capacity for trust, with a substantially increased security apparatus. Second, it draws attention to curriculum stagnation, fake certification, few social science developments, an absence of a discussion of equity, highly dated and nationalistic curriculum, heavily constrained internationalisation and the diminishing or negligible role of research. Third, it describes a student experience that while seemingly increasing access to HE, is marked by substantial discontent (see also Buckner, 2011), infrastructural devastation, high attrition rates, concerns for personal safety, increasing financial difficulties, and corruption; and highly distressing living and studying conditions (Dillabough, Fimyar, McLaughlin, Al-Azmeh, & Jebril, 2018). Findings also point to the fragmentation of Syrian HE and to human rights abuses directed against many of its members, increased militarisation of university life, and a substantive loss of academic and human capital. Yet despite these recent publications and the online grey literature to which they refer, most recent research on Syrian education has been focused on refugee education beyond Syria's borders and has yet to substantively address these matters in the context of Syrian HE and its potential link to the politics of identity and cultural trauma.

To address this gap, we now review theoretical literature relevant to the findings we have unearthed about student inclusion and exclusion in Syrian HE and its link to culture, memory, trauma, and dictatorships. We develop a conceptual framework that speaks in particular to existing research on issues of higher education under dictatorship. This framework – whilst exploratory in form – is drawn upon to build on cultural trauma theory, which, since its inception in the early 1980s, is yet to engage with questions of

conflict and HE and its pivotal role in shaping or thwarting cultural trauma, particularly under authoritarianism. In so doing, we outline the ways in which collective trauma interacts with the politics of identity management in the realm of HE fracturing the paradigmatically dominant vision between the realm of HE as part of a 'public' versus private world, as well as divisions between official and unofficial memory. This demands a rethinking, in particular, of the relationship of what is presumed to be an accumulation of private traumas expressed through collective narration and memory and what is presumed to be the official hijacking of heterogeneous accounts of violence secured through patrimonial practices in HE.

Cultural trauma occurs when a collectivity experiences a grave injustice or catastrophic event that leaves indelible marks on its group consciousness, marking its collective memory in ways that deeply and irrevocably transform its sense of identity (Alexander, 2004, p. 1). Narration and distribution processes need to occur in order to transform multiple personal direct traumatic experiences into a collective and often visceral one of shared historical woundedness.¹ This construction process is sometimes referred to as *trauma work*; a process in which intellectuals, political leaders, and symbol creators of all kinds make competing claims about the nature of the pain, the nature of the victim and the attribution of responsibility' (Alexander, 2012, pp. 18–19). Crucial to this process is the identification of protagonists and antagonists and weaving them into accusatory narratives projected to public audiences. Which narrative wins out is a matter of performative and distributive power; both largely contingent on material resources which determine what narrative is heard and by whom (Alexander, 2004, 2012). As such in the context of a failed revolution against a dictatorship, distributive power is monopolised, including in HE settings, by the state. As a result, cultural trauma narratives, and their various identifications of pain, victim, perpetrator, and solution, are censored and controlled by its institutions. In the context of pervasive personal trauma experiences, and broadly circulating community narratives about them, the outcome is a disjuncture between state narratives as performed, secured and legitimised through educational institutions and community narratives as performed within the realm of the private or discussed, anonymously, on social media. Ultimately, this disjuncture wounds the relationship between HE members and their institutions and undermines the educational process.

The significance of access to means of symbolic production for effective cultural trauma construction is well elaborated in the cultural trauma literature (see Alexander, 2017, p. 79; Alexander, Giesen, & Mast, 2006; Ushiyama & Baert, 2016). However, the important and unique role of education in this process is under-examined. Whilst the means of symbolic production would encompass educational settings as sites of 'social performances',² arguably the role of education is so central to the process of cultural trauma construction and identity management that it warrants focused investigation. When the central role of education in the narration of cultural trauma is not directly addressed, not only is one of the most significant tools for the institutionalisation of the 'winning trauma narrative' overlooked, but it can also lead to a double bind of collective inertia and collective guilt (Schaap, 2001). In the context of autocratic regimes, the narration of trauma is not only controlled by those with access to the mass media, but, significantly, by those with access to education policy making, curriculum design, aligning governance structures as well as access to students in educational settings. The politics of access to HE determine who these are and what trauma narratives they propagate.

Examining Syria's HE system under regime control through a cultural trauma lens is also useful in demonstrating the ways in which HEIs become sites of state oppression. This is because cultural traumas are public expressions and discursive presentations of 'deeply felt emotions and identities' (Eyerman, 2012, p. 571) and obstructing the very possibility of these acts of public expression and representation means that the therapeutic effect of trauma narration on the victimised collectivity (Ushiyama & Baert, 2016) is severely undermined including in HE institutions – an often vital site for self-expression, identity formation and the building of knowledge frameworks for life and the wider world. Instead, as we demonstrate later in the paper, Syrian HE institutions are experienced by many HE members as sites of political repression, subjugation and surveillance depending on their 'ethico-political positioning' vis-à-vis the uprising of 2011. 'Ethico-political positioning' refers to the broad political or ethical stance which an academic or intellectual adopts and the consequent political and ethical concerns which underscore their interventions (Baert, 2015). As we will argue in this paper, academics' positionings were a key determinant not only of their ability to continue to operate within HEIs but also of their personal safety and security within the country due to the threat that their counter-narrative may pose to the regimes' monopoly on the cultural trauma construction process.

A notable contribution to the questions raised in this paper is Michalinos Zembylas's study on 'The Politics of Trauma in Education' (2008), which highlights the affective ways in which traumatic events produce a 'wound culture', a culture where private or collective injuries unfold and seep into the public, shaping and confronting the lives of educators and students thereby regulating interactions with others which have a 'collective echo' (see Felman, 2001) so powerful that they impact on trauma narratives in unpredictable ways. Zembylas (2008) proposes the development of a critical history and politics of trauma in education – one he labels 'critical emotional praxis' – aiming to create openings for different affective relations with others by interrogating the politics of trauma in educational contexts to assist students and educators in confronting their responsibility for preventing future conflicts (pp. 1–2). Zembylas, however, is concerned with national reconciliation and peace education. Therefore, an analysis of education under dictatorship, where those who control education were at least partially responsible for atrocities committed, remains absent from the wider dialogue about HE and conflict and their links to cultural trauma. Very few case studies are brought into Zembylas's book (2008) and none demonstrate how in the absence of an education-based 'critical-emotional-practice', education continues to be one of the most dominant tools for reproducing repressive trauma narratives under dictatorship.

The impact of the absence of such trauma reflection in education has been addressed by Michelle Bellino's (2014) research in Guatemala which examines how aspects of the civil war between 1990 and 1996 were silenced by students, parents and educators, and argues that the absence of critical and collective reflection on it have resulted in a relegation of historical memories of war 'to the realm of unofficial spaces, where local memory communities' tell different stories, and pre-existing social divisions, of the kind that led to the war, are preserved (Bellino, as cited in Williams, 2014, p. 7). Such accounts are also supported by those who are deemed both memory and state theorists such as Arendt who have argued since the end of World War II that state silence or the erasure of counter memories on war and atrocity through education has led to the repetition of state atrocities.

Several case studies in Williams's (2014) volume, *(Re)Constructing Memory: School Textbooks and the Imagination of the Nation*, show how the curriculum is often used by discredited political regimes after civil war and genocide to provide information and narratives that represent and enforce the political intent of the state. Williams (2014) argues –

Yet students do not ingest this intended curriculum whole. Instead, the intended curriculum is conveyed, and in the process interpreted, by teachers. It is then acquired by students, but in the process reinterpreted. (pp. viii–ix)

These processes take place in an instructive environment that is cultural and political and therefore, while text books and curriculum design are important factors in defining cultural trauma narratives, the 'affective ethos' of schools, primarily enacted in a sphere of relationality, is of prime importance in how competing trauma narratives circulate, are enacted or obfuscated in educational settings (Williams, 2014). This relational and affective sphere is where the constitution of new subjectivities and new alliances have to be pursued and sustained. And therefore, in contexts like Syria, where schools are quasi-military organisations whose interest in subjugating and deceiving the population are far greater than their interest in educating it, new and different alliances are needed 'to change the affective ethos of schools' and to 'transform the often pervasive conflicting ethos through the invention of alternative educational spaces that might enable renewed coalitions and solidarity between individuals and across communities' (Zembylas, 2008, p. 17).

Levy (1981), writing in *Comparing Authoritarian Regimes in Latin America: Insights from Higher Education Policy*, highlights some of the key characteristics of HE systems under bureaucratic authoritarianism. While these are not identical to totalitarian dictatorships, they share features such as rationalisation, exclusionary admission policies and intense coercion aiming to 'quash democratic expressions of strength' (p. 39), which also foregrounded the context in which students and academics experienced Syrian HE in the research we conducted.

Such dynamics apply across all stages of education, particularly when higher education is designed as a site for continued indoctrination through mandatory courses like 'nationalism education', compulsory activities such as military camps, and semi-compulsory memberships such as (ruling) party and student union membership to which students were recruited through intimidation, threat or discrimination. Ismail (2018) states that while nominal membership was possible in the late 1990s and in the 2000s, active membership was a necessary condition for academic, social or professional advancement. Indeed, membership in these organisations no longer served an indoctrination objective as the party had already been hollowed out of its ideological dimension over the last four decades. Its relevance as a governmental apparatus had become exclusive to 'its role in socialisation and education, and in terms of how its rituals and rhetoric inform an institutionalised imaginary' (p. 68). Membership in these organisations thus became part of 'the discursive civilities deployed to locate complicit subjects – those who compromised' (Ismail, 2018, pp. 68, 128). This is corroborated in our work particularly where participants discussed how the student union was a means of HE infiltration and HE had become a site of terror, representing an example of 'military management' where faculty members were not able to do anything because the security forces were breaking into classes (Dillabough, fieldnotes, July 2017).

In what follows we explore how cultural trauma under dictatorship is often shaped and reproduced through patrimonial governance of HE and authoritarian forms of identity management and HE access and exclusion. The collective experience of traumatic events therefore needs to be understood in light of the part played by HE in either securing a politics of freedom or cultures of narrative constraint, the recognition or hijacking of memory, and the expression or appropriation of heterogenous narrations of trauma into state narratives of official memory. The complexity of these conceptual reflections, we argue, often rests with a study of the discrepancy and tensions between what culture can express as a form of recognition and justice, and what it articulates through its modalities of authoritarian governance. A study of these fault lines in HE may provide some way towards new socio-political conceptualisations of HE, conflict and cultural trauma. The research we now share represents an experimental example of how we may begin to think more substantively about these concepts and relations.

Methods

Research methods for the larger study from which this paper emanated were originally designed with the objective of assessing the status and conditions of HE across Syria, pre- and post-2011 from the perspective of Syrian academics and students in exile. To undertake this task, we developed a series of workshops that could be drawn upon both as data sources and capacity building exercises with the aim of observing and mapping the temporal changes in HE both before and after the onset of the conflict. During workshops we developed detailed interview protocols in collaboration with 11 Syrian academics trained in qualitative data collection methods, so that they could undertake remote interviews with other Syrian scholars, staff and students still working or studying at Syrian HE institutions at the time of the study. The co-researchers collected 117 remote interviews³ in Syria with a total of 41 HE staff and 76 students representing 11 universities (7 public and 4 private), which, in July 2017, were located in regime (8 universities) and non-regime (3 universities) controlled areas. Alongside these 117 interviews, the core research team conducted open-ended interviews with 19 Syrian academics and students living in exile in Turkey.⁴ Interviews with Syrian scholars addressed personal and professional experiences of displacement and its consequences; a mapping of the contours of HE (pre- and post-2011) through assessments of historical and political developments in public and private universities; the role of the security apparatus in the structure and governance of HE and HE practices; and consequences for research and teaching (pre- and post-2011). Extensive fieldnotes were also taken and are drawn upon here as a supplementary resource designed to provide greater depth and constancy to the data collected for this project, and its significance for exploring the concepts of HE, conflict and trauma.

Here we draw on three sets of data from this study. The first comprises documents such as memos and circulars related to HE provided by participants during the study. The second comprises the remotely collected interviews with students and staff inside Syria outlining the student experience at various stages from admission to graduation. The third draws on the interviews with displaced academics and associated fieldnotes collected by members of the research team. Specifically, here, we draw on excerpts pertinent to the narration of trauma or accounts of the exclusion of academics from HE based on the

trauma narratives they express. We do not draw upon these interviews and associated fieldnotes to focus upon individual displacement trajectories as forthcoming work emanating from the same study addresses these (see McLaughlin, 2019). Rather, we highlight specifically the dynamics of trauma narration inside Syrian HE as it is expressed by those who experienced it. Some of this data addresses the political persecution of students and staff. But we have also included data that describes mechanisms of HE inclusion and exclusion, particularly as they relate to staff. We do so to offer some way towards revealing how a regime monopoly on HE politicisation frames the socio-political environment and landscapes of trauma shaping the student and faculty experience. We also identify how social trust is undermined in such HE sites and how its erosion shapes the way students relate to their HE institutions when they are viewed as proxies of an oppressive state.

Empirical observations and conceptual insights

There is no doubt that the events that began to unfold in 2011 in Syria had a devastating impact on HE. But to some degree, these changes were quantitative in the sense that HE institutions still continued to operate, even under destructive conditions of war and territorial fragmentation (Milton, 2019). Importantly, however, chronic problems in Syrian higher education were significantly exacerbated. We will focus on four of these pre-existing but gravely exacerbated problems, which were borne out in our work on Syrian HE in conflict:

- (1) The dominance of patrimonial favouritism or so called *wasta* was already a grievance among not only Syrian youth but across the region (World Bank, 2012). However, after 2011, an institutionalised form of nepotism not premised on social capital and connections but rather on prescribed and often institutionalised performances of regime loyalty, was significantly expanded particularly affecting student admission, progression and retention;
- (2) Inequalities in access and retention became widespread as did HE exam and credential corruption, enhanced by a generalised state of permissiveness concerning standards and rigour as logistical challenges to learning presented themselves, particularly to those with no social or financial capital to mitigate or overcome them;
- (3) Mechanisms of exclusion from HE took a more violent turn using repression tactics ranging from the already existing intimidation and harassment to broad scale expulsion, forced militarisation, arrest, torture and, based on several accounts, killing;
- (4) Coercion and punishment were sometimes pre-empted through migration thus raising brain drain to extraordinary levels.

Access inequalities based on loyalty to the regime

In examining issues related to access and retention, participants brought our attention to the role of the regime in privileging its supporters. Beyond focus group discussions documenting this privileging and associated corruption, they highlighted in particular a number of decrees and decisions that were introduced after 2011 which privileged regime loyalists, particularly those with family members injured serving in the security forces or the military. For example, Decree No. 6 of 2013 and Law No. 36 of 2014

reserve 50% of overall academic programme capacity in public universities for the families of martyrs. Additionally, the Ministry of Higher Education allocated 15 seats in each faculty, department or discipline in Legislative Decree No. 293 of 2016. The fee of university services was reduced by 75% for families of martyrs registered in undergraduate parallel education programmes of Syrian public universities and by 50% for martyrs' children, parents or widows accepted in parallel education postgraduate studies (Syrian Arab Republic Prime Ministry, 2018). In all of the above, 'martyrs' refers exclusively to those killed or injured fighting on the side of the regime while the vast majority of the war's victims were neutral civilians, protesters, or militants fighting against it.

These decrees are in addition to pre-existing policies which offer extra marks on high school transcripts and improved chances of admission into university for those who complete certain military courses like the parachutist classes (Ismail, 2018) or the 'thunderbolt' (*sayiqā*) courses.

In the 1980s, the regime emptied universities of their scientific missions, when it created a special trade-off to enter the university by belonging to the military umbrella: the 'Thunderbolt' *Sayiqā*, the Revolutionary Youth Federation established, the [Baath] party, and others. With the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in 2011, Baath Party offices within the university were transformed into security offices to receive daily reports against professors and students opposed to the regime and sympathisers of the revolution, in coordination with the representatives of the security branches in each faculty, where many professors and students were sent to prisons and terrorism courts. College cellars were turned into security-run detention centres, in order to achieve absolute control over academic institutions, as is achieved in military and security institutions (Mustafa, as cited in Saado, 2018).

While official admission criteria remained generally transparent and largely unchanged after 2011 at public universities in regime areas, exceptions in admission and post graduate opportunities continued to be made based on political affiliation including through institutionalised means:

Rather than being based on academic standards like in international universities, priority in graduate study abroad grants [*albaeathat aleilmia*] is given to security report writers. (Mustafa, as cited in Saado, 2018)

In field notes, we reflected on related comments: some reported that there were many exceptions for those who were regime supporters in HE. 'Most kept their jobs but they were largely Alawites or in inner circles' (Dillabough, Fieldnotes, July 2017). This is what Balibar (2015) refers to as a process of internal bordering through the assertion of political ideals within institutions to ensure that HE access policies enforced and maintained existing power structures and protect regime dominance within the education system and beyond it. As one participant reported: 'The intelligence intervenes in students' lives from the moment of their admission until their graduation; they choose specific students to be assigned to each academic year' (Interviewee 15). Similarly, a participant noted that political loyalties factored into admission decisions: 'There was a proportion of students admitted to universities because of their party affiliation and not their grades' (university 10 staff 5). Another participant at the university confirmed this claim by pointing out that 'admission is based on the admission exam for each college as well as the rank of the student in the political party' (university 5 staff 3).

Thus, rather than empowering marginalised groups, the politicisation of HE and the methods of institutionalised exceptionalism that it generated aimed to reinforce power, solidify regime dominance, relegate members who didn't actively endorse its discourse and exclude those who threatened its monopoly over the trauma narrative.

Access inequalities based on power and wealth

When addressing educational access in a context of prolonged war it is important to consider the logistical factors that enable or disable already admitted students to continue to pursue their education in dramatically altered circumstances. As various participants revealed, access to services, significantly compromised during the war, was critical for the ability to continue to pursue an education and feelings of insecurity were evident. One participant observed, for example, that: 'I began my study during the crisis. I faced problems of water and electricity shortages as well as lack of security and this resulted in problems at university' (uni 4 student 25). Safe commuting was highlighted as an obstacle to access during the war, particularly a student's sense of confidence in the ability to safely pass military checkpoints. Again, access was linked to fear, insecurity and regime dominance: 'Currently the security factor is the basis of access to universities, most students fear frequent passage of security or military checkpoints' (uni 10 staff 2). Consequently, universities suffered unprecedentedly high attrition rates.

Services were in shortage, with cuts in electricity, water and Internet. Moving from one neighbourhood to another became almost impossible. For example, for 'moving from a regime-controlled neighbourhood to another under opposition control you would need 14 h ... Teaching continued but with a different [lower] level of quality. The number of students decreased significantly' (Interviewee 19).

But the ability to cross military checkpoints safely, get exceptional access to services or pay for solutions to daily logistical problems which the war presented (electricity, heating, Internet, transport, etc.) was primarily contingent on connections to power and/or access to wealth, both largely conditional on political views and loyalties. The centrality of connections and wealth for access to services was true not only during war but, across the region, even during times of peace (See Egan & Tabar, 2016; Oukil, 2016). However, such class division was radically exacerbated by war. For example, 'if the student was on a limited income then the choice would be the closer university regardless of quality' (uni 4 student 21) because of their inability to pay for relatively safe transport or housing near campus, both rendered absurdly expensive if private, or contingent on having connections to power if public (e.g. university housing). As we are told, in conflict areas, students who could not get university residence were unable to attend lectures or in some cases get to exams (uni 4 student 23) because the devastation and dangers associated with travelling across checkpoints carried too much risk to safety. Additionally, students without access to wealth or power were out-competed by those with the social or financial capital to obtain university degrees through illicit means and corruption: 'After 2011, access to university for supporters of the regime became very easy. In addition, a degree is available in exchange for money' (uni 7 student 1).

As Egan and Tabar (2016) argued in Lebanon, in Syria too, the phenomenon of *wasta* played a 'role in the exchange of scarce social resources, and hence – ultimately – in social reproduction' (p. 250). Such reproduction, at least in the case of Syria, was not

merely related to social class but also to socio-political power dynamics, collective identity, historical memory, and trauma narrative. To put this differently, internalising Syria's official account of the conflict reproduced privilege and undermined diverse traumatic experiences. Fieldnotes collected during workshops and conversations in focus groups all suggested that corruption in relation to access was widespread. Degrees and examination certificates were reportedly being created en masse for regime supporters so that they could continue with their education: 'in group discussion again the use of the term corruption emerged and many shared that one could only move forward in regime climates with financial or religious handshakes that lead to survival but perpetuate hate' (Dillabough, Fieldnotes, June 2017). One could argue, then, that in controlling access to HE, the regime ensured that its narratives about collective trauma were imposed on the majority of the population – narratives likely to be experienced as assaults on the dignity of the many silent victims of state violence or family members of such victims who remained in HE.

Persecution of politically in compliant HE members

As part of the regime's strategy to instil a self-serving hegemonic vision of history, impose an authoritative version of 'what happened' in 2011, and monopolise the right to articulate it (see also Mihai, 2019), mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion ensured HE became a site for re-legitimizing the regime, enforcing its narratives and erasing counter memories of trauma in Syria. Interviewee 9, a displaced academic from the larger study, for example, described how challenging the regime's cultural trauma narratives was not only an immediate cause for exclusion from the education system but often also the basis for imprisonment, torture, or killing.

Nobody should support a government that kills its own people. But unfortunately, we lived this experience. All the excuses that the government was making about the situation, everything they told us, was not true. It was the opposite of the reality, actually. Some lecturers were detained because they criticised the security situation or because they were against shooting people in peaceful demonstrations, using live ammunition at the beginning of the crisis. Some of those lecturers who were detained died in custody. They were famous lecturers with good reputations. Others were killed because of their opinions (Interviewee 9).

In other cases, exclusion was administered through intimidation or coercion. For example, another participant shared that in one faculty, members who signed a petition against air strikes and the bombing of churches and historical sites in Aleppo were summoned to security centres and Baath party offices for interrogation and were pressured to make a counter statement declaring that they were misled (Dillabough, Fimyar, McLaughlin, Al-Azmeh, et al., 2018, p. 188). Many said that Aleppo (and its university) ultimately became the centre of the revolution but this meant that it was targeted by the regime much more substantially than other HE sites. In another example, the university discontinued paying academics their salaries, based on their stance vis-à-vis the movement.

After the Syrian revolution, I had a stance, like many others [supporting the revolution]. So in the last year [before leaving Syria], they stopped my salary ... Some of my friends were killed because of this at the beginning of the revolution. (Interviewee 18)

Fieldnotes supported this case. For example, many in discussion reported that the 'universities were further strengthened by regime security branches at all levels of the university,

through student infiltration from the union to heightened military management ... where the security outlook was everything'. Anyone who sought transparency was forced to flee, was fired from the university, or in many cases, arrested, disappeared, or detained. In one such example of narrative disjuncture, interrogations took place and the interrogated academics had to sign agreements with the authorities testifying that they had lied. Through such mechanisms of intimidation, HE aimed to control its members' schemes of perception, and political imagination not just via compensation policies and patrimony as we have seen but by ensuring educators were carriers of these dominant narratives dedicated to instilling state sanctioned doxa and protecting habits of remembering and imagining from what Mihai (2019) terms 'hermeneutical dissonance': raising awareness by challenging entrenched hierarchies of authority and institutionalised memories. But even when such disturbances were not committed, disjuncture in the trauma narrative of 'what happened' continues, maintaining a festering sense of injustice which could result in severe forms of cognitive dissonance addressed by defences like pretence, disavowal or contrived apathy, all of which undermine both the tools and outcomes of the educational process as well as individual and social well-being.

Brain drain

Escaping the cognitive dissonance and ethical dilemmas presented by this situation was partly achieved through migration; often a necessary course of action for educators who were incapable or unwilling to fake loyalty. Academics in our sample, for example, were aware that it was possible to prevent exclusion and punishment by neglecting their role in the trauma narration process: 'If you keep silent, you are secure', interviewee 7 reported. But an awareness of the unique role of intellectuals in *trauma work* (Eyerman, 2011) prevented some from doing so: 'for a person like me, I am well educated, I am from a select educated class, I should not keep silent. That's why I left Damascus' (Interviewee 7). The view that fleeing would be better than abandoning *trauma work* was shared by many. Another told us:

I can't stay in a country full of oppression and tyranny. I can't stand to see the killing of civilians and remain silent. Sometimes I would speak about this with my students during lectures. So, one of the students said to me, 'You're sacrificing your life with this kind of talk'. (Interviewee 15)

Discussion: HE, exclusion and the narration of trauma

Education is a principal component of constructing individuals' identification with nation and state. Through carefully designed and revised curricula, many national education systems legitimise the state and respond to threats to its supremacy (Williams, 2014, pp. 1–2). However, understanding the nation and its history also occurs in other forms of everyday social learning – including counter-narratives to state-sanctioned forms of nationalism – through the oral history of communities conveying a sense of 'who "we" and "they" are' (p. 4). And while it may be true that in most contexts, hegemony being what it is, official narratives and community ones resonate more often than conflict (Williams, 2014), in contexts where trauma is pervasive, the narratives of superordinate powers are contested by people's lived experience and their previous dominance is shaken in

irreversible ways. In such contexts, the space for memories, introspection, retrospection and tragic remembrances is overrun by ideologically-oriented trauma narratives which the state upholds as its truth. But community narratives, rife with first-hand experiences of counter-memories, challenge authoritarianism's organisations of forgetting and the state's attempts to monopolise collective memory.

In the context of Syria, not unlike other dictatorships (e.g. Chile, Argentina, Egypt), the Assad regime has always used the education system extensively to create a national narrative that legitimises and enforces its authority. Having come to power through a military coup against a government from its own party, this was no easy task. The Syrian educational system was arguably more focused on this legitimisation mission than any other, including its role in creating socialisation programmes for young people to commit an early allegiance to the Syrian nation state and to the Assad regime. A critical reading of the Ministry of Education's (2015) objectives for basic education or the post-secondary compulsory courses in 'nationalism' clearly reveals this focus as does the strong presence for the Internal Security Forces on campuses and the role of the Student Union in monitoring and punishing deviations from the propaganda-esque narratives of the regime. In this way HE is designed to prioritise the project of allegiance building rather than human capacity development. One participant, for example, attributed the deterioration of Syrian universities to the overpoliticization of HE, subjecting universities and research centres to the control and censorship of the security services, and the transformation of universities into 'military centres' exercising strict control and surveillance over teachers, HE employees and universities in general (Aloklah, cited in Saado, 2018).

As early as April 2011, the regime claimed that the perpetrators in the ongoing war were terrorists or agents of Western imperialism, or other parties. These narratives were competing with those of oppositionists, supported by major segments of the Syrian people (see Erlich, 2014), which broadly depicted the movement as an emancipatory popular uprising and held the Assad regime as perpetrator for using violence of the most extreme type to thwart an initially peaceful uprising demanding dignity, freedom and social justice (see, for example, al-Haj Saleh, 2017; Pearlman, 2016; Van Dam, 2017; Wessels, 2015; Yassin-Kassab & Al-Shami, 2016).

The disjuncture between these narratives is not directly manifested in formal educational settings – neither school curricula (Pardo & Jacobi, 2018) nor compulsory university courses on 'nationalism', address the war directly (Issam, 2016). However, we have suggested that this disjuncture is played out in concealed ways in educational settings and sustained by economies of fear and the politics of access to higher education. The disjuncture is also evident in the forms of securitisation and fear mongering that forced HE members and students into the experience of perpetual and relentless surveillance and insecurity. Fieldnotes documented during data collection and workshops point to this reality, where participants spoke of atrocities taking place in education which were unspeakable yet impacting upon them directly:

... again comments emerge about HE representing a groundswell of authoritarianism, as an extreme phenomenon, reports of a number of staff and students who were detained and killed; professors who were forced to either stop talking, or go away or be killed; male students disappeared; and the regime bombarding universities using radical violence. Only those who can comply or are on the inside will survive ... Further references were made to many

intellectuals being forced by the regime to comply or leave the university and Syria. (Dillabough, Fieldnotes, June 2017)

Another comment from fieldnotes summarised statements made by participants:

[T]he war hit the universities physically speaking ... people were detained without any reason ... causing the deaths of hundreds ... now the university mindset is informed directly by its president. (Dillabough, Fieldnotes, June 2017)

In workshops and in interviews we witnessed people sharing such ideas with anger and hurt beyond comprehension and at times even disbelief. There were also times when Syrian interpreters – now living in Turkey – were also experiencing these HE disjunctures, as they too were Syrians living in exile.

More chronic than acute before 2011, we believe this disjuncture shaped the educational experience of at least some Syrians well before the conflict,⁵ nurturing what Scott (1990) calls the ‘hidden transcript’ of the subordinated. The ‘80s events’ and ensuing state violence had a terrifying impact on the population and anchored most Syrians’ political consciousness in fear (Pearlman, 2016). At the time,

... a silent awareness of the atrocities that took place during that era including political imprisonment and torture of anyone who showed any signs of disagreement with the regime, thwarted any hope of challenging it. (p. 24)

But after 2011, the effect of violent repression was reversed. Interviewee 13 describes his own disillusionment with the regime’s narrative concerning the 1980s events including the Hama massacre of 1982:

The regime told us in schools and universities and so on, that it was a group of people who want to destroy the country ... [but now I think] it was a movement to change the regime like the one that’s happening since 6 years. (Interviewee 13)

By excluding and persecuting members who positioned themselves ethico-politically in support of the movement and who as a result might undermine or challenge the regime’s narrative, education not only reproduces a hegemonic political and historical imaginary for those who accept it but also becomes an oppressive environment for those who can’t; one in which the silent victims are subjected to assaults on their dignity when performing loyalty to those they conceive as perpetrators. Such forced performances advanced by the patrimonial governance of HE and enabled by economies of fear (Pearlman, 2016) foster division among social groups, particularly victims and perpetrators, leading to enduring tension and social pain (Ushiyama & Baert, 2016, p. 472).

This renders HE institutions in the eyes of silent oppositional students and staff, and many doubtless still exist, as part of an oppressive state’s apparatus limiting and distorting the educational experience and wounding the relationship between students and their universities in ways that undermined student experience, shaped their feelings of despair about it and fears of it, and heavily influenced their attitudes and distrust towards their universities. Under a dictatorship surviving a revolutionary movement, the cultural trauma construction process is heavily influenced by education as both a tool of symbolic production⁶ and trauma narration in which the state has a monopoly over the ‘coding of evil’ and over the material and demographic resources necessary to disseminate trauma narratives. Intervening into such cycles of injustice is necessary in

order to reform HE and, where possible, ensure that those impacted by trauma – particularly those with highly constrained resources and pathways to trauma narration – can express their narratives and reimagine their lives as actors into the future.

Access inequalities and their resultant narrative disjuncture have significant implications not only for HE itself and for the student experience, but also for the political future of the country. We suggest that the social reproduction resultant from the relationship between *wasta* and access, and the narrative reproduction resultant from purging divergent trauma narratives, not only ensure the continuation of severely unjust social structures but also stand as an obstacle to social reconciliation, HE reconstruction and future education reform.

It may be true that history has long been written by victors, but it is important that such truisms do not go unchallenged in HE. With students from low-income dissident families/regions in Syria being at the highest disadvantage in terms of access, retention and post graduate opportunities, and with many such students having experienced trauma firsthand in ways which are in direct opposition to the regime's narratives, we hold that it is likely – without change or challenge – that the future education system in the country will reproduce the same frictions and socio-political power dynamics that led to unrest in 2011. By understanding these mechanisms of power and narrative reproduction, the critique of HE under dictatorship during conflict can inform decisions on HE reconstruction and reform, as well as future research on HE, dictatorship and conflict in important and timely ways.

Notes

1. This is what Ricoeur (2018) refers to as manipulated memory suggesting that these wounds and their associated memories are sustained through a process of intense cultural and political operatives and modalities of power in the state.
2. Jeffrey Alexander's work examines the ways in which social actors create social or cultural performances by which they individually or collectively display for others the meaning of their social situation. They seek to convey authenticity by drawing upon the various elements of social performance such as systems of collective representation, means of symbolic production, etc.
3. These 117 interviews are referenced as 'Uni [number]_student [number]'.
4. The interviews with 19 displaced academics are referenced in the paper as 'Interviewee [number]'.
5. It is impossible to empirically assess such a claim in an authoritarian country like Syria, but several of the authors of this paper rely on the kind of inside information that Michael Polanyi (1958) labelled as 'tacit knowledge'. This is knowledge that is best gained through experience. Several of the authors of this paper are informed by the tacit knowledge that comes with having learned and taught in Syrian HE institutions at various stages of Assad rule.
6. Means of symbolic production refers to 'the physical place of a social performance, the mode of transmission (live performance; radio, television, or online broadcast; print media; etc.) as well as the props used to convey meaning'. (Glossary of Terms: Alexander, 2014)

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