Deferred Involvement: Memories and Praxes of Iraqi Intellectuals as Civil-Society Activists between Iraq, Jordan and Syria

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DRAFT

A number of Iraqi intellectuals ('Aboud 2002 and al-Khalil 1989 in particular) living in exile in the 1980s and 1990s and influent among scholars and policy makers have maintained that the Iraqi political system during the last two decades of the Ba'thist rule was totalitarian to the extend of leaving no space for autonomous social spheres. The contention of these intellectuals is that the violence and domination exerted by the regime and its apparatus of control (the Ba'th party and its formal mass organisations, agents of the system of surveillance and repression, patronage networks etc.) destroyed any remains of what had constituted, in previous decades, a civil society albeit one that was restricted to an urban educated elite with a self-defined secular and modernist outlook.

Eric Davis, in *Memories of State* (2005) and previous articles, opened a breach in the totalitarian paradigm, however one that remained limited by the lack of direct access the author had to Iraq in the 1990s. Looking specifically at state-sponsored historiography and official patronage of cultural production, Davis reckons that, initially, "the Ba'thist regime placed great emphasis on creating a political culture that could accommodate all sectors of Iraqi society, albeit in a hierarchical form" (183). Shifts of paradigms in the public discourse and practices, apparent as of the 1980s, were reinforced after 1990-1991 with the new salience of tribalism and sectarianism, the seizing of the cultural sector as a propaganda industry focusing on Saddam's persona, and the halt of innovation in state-sponsored cultural production. While, on the one hand, it became increasingly difficult for many secular and educated Iraqis to reconcile the Ba'th's shifts of paradigms with the progressive and modernist overtone of earlier years, on the other hand, a "counter-hegemonic" discourse produced by the exile Iraqi intelligentsia started finding its way inside Iraq at a time when the coercive apparatus of the regime loosened its grip on the circulation of oppositional literature published outside Iraq. Davis highlights the role of the expatriate activists and intellectuals who, he writes, "confronted issues such as sectarianism, democracy, cultural pluralism, federalism, and demilitarization of the state, not to mention issues of social justice" (231) and promoted "alternative models of political community" (259). Within a Gramscian perspective the author asks "What role did the counter-hegemonic memory developed by the Iraqi opposition [in exile] play in the Ba'th's collapse, and what role can it play in the ongoing transition to democracy?" (227).

Unable, like the majority of foreign social scientists with an interest in Iraq, to conduct in-depth research inside the country during the last period of Ba'thist rule, Davis was not in a position to give

indications as of how the counter-hegemonic discourses and memories produced by exiles was received by Iraqis inside, not could he consider the possibility that an autonomous counter-discourse might have been produced by collectives inside Iraq the memory of which would form the basis of subsequent involvement in post-Ba'thist Iraq.

It is this latter aspect that I aim to explore in this paper based on interviews conducted in Amman and Damascus in 2008-2009 with a number of self-defined Iraqi "intellectuals" (*muthaqqafin*) who spent their formative years at the University of Baghdad in the 1990s where they participated, within alternative intellectual circles, to the production of a highly conceptual counter-hegemonic discourse that did not translate, at the time, into any direct form of political opposition. They had to defer the time, space and realm of their involvement with Iraqi politics. In the post-Ba'thist era these former "alternative intellectuals" are engaged in a transnational field of Iraqi civil society activism from safe bases in Amman or Damascus.

Based on 16 in-depth individual interviews, and many more group discussions, I will explore the shared memories members of this group have of their intellectual formation in Baghdad under the embargo, and the conditions and practicalities of their current involvement from Amman or Damascus in what they define as Iraqi "civil society" under the new governance regime. The issue of the the link that they consciously make between their past experiences and their present praxes will engage more directly with the central question this workshop aims to tackle: "How memory constitutes, or might contribute in the future to a sense of Iraqi identity in an era of diaspora and national reconstruction".

1. Acknowledging the existence of autonomous social spheres under the Ba'th

The existence of marginal spaces of autonomous expression in Baghdad under the embargo did not evaded the handful of young French social scientists (Baran 2004; Darle 2003; Rigaud 2001, 2003) who were able to conduct research, mostly unofficially, in Iraq during the last few years of Saddam's rule. They all concur with Davis about the weakening of the regime's legitimacy among educated secular urbanites (and others) as a result of a combination of factors: the brutal repression of the 1991 *intifadah* in the south*,* shifts in the regime's domestic political priorities, obvious corruption and malfunctioning in the state system, and predation by the power elite. They also agree that, during the embargo, the mechanisms of state coercion were less pervasive whereas state patronage was withdrawn from entire areas where the regime used to exert monopoly over the discourse on history, culture and national identity. Direct observation and interactions with Iraqis led these scholars to identify the emergence of marginal spaces of autonomous expression in the form of informal social circles where an alternative discourse was produced and that remained, by and large, tolerated as long as they did not represent a threat to the regime. Although their works draw from different theoretical backgrounds, Rigaud, Darle and Baran conclude that these social circles did not have the potential to be agents of political change "from within" because coercion was still operating, mostly indirectly, as a deterrent setting strict limits to expressions and activities within these alternative spaces.

Françoise Rigaud (2001, 2003), albeit concerned to make visible the mechanisms that rendered impossible a "movement from the inside" (*L'impossible mouvement de l'intérieur*, 2001), points at spaces of autonomy "with little visibility" and at a process by which discourse was "re-conquered from the regime". Besides multiple individual and daily practices of "incivility" that made the state apparatus less credible (2001: 21), Rigaud goes as far as identifying a subversive shadow culture (*thaqafat ed-dhil*) emerging in reaction to the new themes promoted by official state culture. She gives as examples the collections of poems and short-stories - often hand-written – that were

photocopied for circulation, evading censorship. Many were using free verses, colloquial Arabic and subversive metaphors along the model set by the celebrated exiled poet Muzzafar al-Nawwab (Rigaud 2001: 21-22; 2003: 213; on al-Nawwab see Bardenstein 1997). Volumes written on Iraqi society and state from a critical non-state sponsored perspective, and the memoirs of opposition figures in exile were also photocopied and available for sale in the famous al-Mutannabi market (2003: 212). Rigaud, with reference to the work of J. C. Scott (1990) on the ways subaltern people resist domination, reads in these practices forms of resistance, emancipation and transgression, and of appropriation of a "space of non-state". She concludes, however, that this off-stage critique of power – Scott's "hidden transcript"- never threatened the dominant order that was able to contain it by deterrence (through memories and rumours of coercion), hence preventing endogenous change.

Pierre Darle (2003), premising his demonstration on a view of language as the primary element of domination, applies linguistic and psychoanalytic theories of sense making to an analysis of the discourse of the regime and of what he conceptualises as "the anomic segment of society". By that Darle means the generation socialised in the ideas of nationalism, progress and modernisation and to whom the new ideological references (tribal, religious etc.) proposed by the regime in the 1990s were alienating (24). Anomie, a Durkheimian concept, implies a social condition in which norms are weak, conflicting, or absent. In Iraq, anomie followed the "shattering of representation systems" after the rupture of 1991 when no single collective structure took charge of sense making with the result that polysemy – distinct from dialogic pluralism - developed instead. Darle scrutinizes "circles of subversive sociabilities" (74) which he sees as enclaves or "free zones" (following Erving Goffman) where individuals belonging to the anomic segment of society strove to recover a coherence between their values and their practices to dissipate their inner tensions. Darle questions the performative capacity of members of these circles and the ultimate function of transgression in what he calls "the Iraqi ambiguous context of domination", ie a situation in which the regime granted several collectives and communities degrees of autonomy to produce reality, sense and identities in return for individual and collective acquiescence to the regime's hegemonic discourse of domination and repression. In such an "ambiguous" context, members of "circles of subversive sociabilities" were incapable to pragmatically project their values outside the circles they frequented (they had no *programme d'action"*). Therefore, Darle concludes, what happened was not opposition but cathartic therapy in enclaves that, far from threatening the system, contributed to its reproduction.

David Baran (2004), finally, applies a less sophisticated conceptual apparatus to an understanding of life under tyrannic rule and of the longevity of the regime. He challenges the perceived homogeneity and purely repressive character of the regime by pointing out areas of friction and disorder and a range of governmental techniques far more flexible than the somehow static mechanisms of central governance based on pure repression, particularly during the last decade of Saddam Husayn's rule. He describes several "spaces of autonomy" vis-à-vis the regime but nevertheless maintains that "through intentional or non intentional mechanisms, the regime remains the master and the arbiter controlling access to resources" (105). Looking specifically at the cultural sector, he contends that "Artists and authors, practically devoid of any resource outside the regime, have no other choice but to cultivate the latter's favours" (108) and that "Any strategy in conformity with the nature of the system rapidly leads to a total compromise" (109).

Achim Rhode**,** in his recent book S*tate-Society Relations in Ba'thist Iraq: Facing Dictatorship* (2009), has synthesized these various approaches in his consideration of the relations between arts and politics in the 1980s and 1990s (Chapter 2.2). He takes ambiguities, controversies and autonomous spaces as evidences, inside Iraq, of the "perseverance of a rudimentary political sphere expressed through art" that played on the new possibilities offered to circumvent censorship and

repression especially as of 1991. For Rohde, exile, silence or total compromise were not the only options facing artists. Rather, for those who stayed in Iraq and continued to express themselves, mutual accommodation between artists and the regime was the rule. Reviewing the work of a number of Iraqi writers and literary critiques, Rohde reports an accentuation, in the 1990s, of an abstract and metaphorical trend of short-stories critical of the regime that already existed in the 1980s. Poetry, on the other hand, remained a privileged vehicle for expression. Independent poets displayed a marked tendency towards the expression of individual feelings and the use of satire and irony rather than adopting realism and focusing on official themes and the persona of the dictator. They also used the free verse technique and, at times, colloquial Arabic - ie stylistic deviations from the standard rules of classical Arabic poetry- following prominent exiled leftist poets (such as al-Bayati, al-Sayyab and al-Nawwab), deviations that were not tolerated by censorship in Iraq before the 1990s. Following, among others, Terri DeYoung (1998) and Muhsin Jassim Al-Musawi (2006), Rohde suggests that:

> "Iraqi arts might be better understood through the lens of postcolonial theory as tools for the formation of identity that alternate between normative discourses prescribed either by colonial authorities or indigenous rulers on the one hand and the subjectivity of human agency on the other. Viewed from this angle, cultural production cannot be entirely controlled by any state. It always contains the potential of turning into activities of resistance."

Rohed finally reviews the limited space allowed for independent theatrical and film production. The latter sector had all but collapsed after 1991, however:

> "(...) students continued to study film at the Institute of Fine Arts, working mainly on video, as other material was expensive and hard to find. One of them was Oday Rasheed ['Uday Rashid], today one of the country's foremost film makers, creator of the first post-Saddam Iraqi movie called "Underexposure", which was released in 2005[1]. During the 1990s, he joined a group of dissident young writers and artists who called themselves "Al-Najeen", the Survivors. They vowed not to cooperate with the regime, but rather work on the margins. Similar to what is known of East European dissident artists during the time of the Cold War, they met in private circles, and their works circulated between friends[2]. Informal social circles of this sort reportedly multiplied during the late 1990s, some of them meeting regularly. Sometimes merely protected spaces for leisure activities and unrestrained talk with trustworthy persons, some of these circles were also dedicated to discussing literature, films, etc. They constituted autonomous though isolated social structures that operated with a degree of independence, and at times followed consciously oppositional agendas."

2. Memories of being alternative intellectuals in the Iraq of the embargo

I will now make use of the narratives of former members of such social circles whom I have been meeting and interviewing in Amman and Damascus in 2008 and 2009. Because I work with several of them as researchers on a project about Iraqis in Jordan and Syria, because I also socialise with most of them on a more or less regular basis outside of a professional relation, and finally because we share in large part the same epistemological approaches to issues of memory and narration, I have engaged with them on their memories and praxes as interlocutors rather than as informants. My interlocutors are a loose collective of twenty to twenty-five male and female Iraqis who define themselves as intellectuals and who have come to stay in Damascus or Amman at various points in time over the last ten years (1999-2009), the majority after the fall of Saddam Hussayn and mostly in 2006 to escape physical danger (kidnapping or assassination attempts on themselves or their

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[1] *Underexposure* (Iraq/Germany 2005), by Oday Rasheed, won the price of Best Film at the 18th International Film Festival in Singapore and the Golden Hawk, the price for the best movie, at the 5th Arab Film Festival, Rotterdam, in 2005.

[2] Rohde's account of Oday Rahseed and Al-Najeen is based on an interview the former gave to *The Straits Times*, 13 December 2003.

spouses) and/or new types of restriction on public expression. They are in their late thirties or early forties, and the majority are married with children. They all know each other, several collaborate within professional circles but they do not all maintain close friendship ties. They all met initially while studying at the University of Baghdad in the 1990s or because they participated in alternative intellectual circles that were led by students or junior faculty from the university. They share an acute sense of the fragmentation of the political and of collective identity in Iraq under the new governance regime, and they are actively involved from their current place of residence in efforts that run against that fragmentation. These activities take various forms: creative production (cinema and video, plastic art, literature); research and expertise on Iraqi society and politics; journalism and publishing; management of programmes of reconciliation or training; human or women's rights advocacy; and often a combination of several of the above. They conceptualise of their professional activities as "civil-society activism", or "political involvement outside of the parties" where they aim at promoting a non-sectarian and pluralistic space of expression and governance inside Iraq.

In conscious rupture with previous generations of intellectuals who had to leave Iraq to seek spaces of physical security and free expression, my interlocutors do not not define themselves as "exiles". In a subsequent section of this paper, I will try to show how they conceive of themselves as a new intellectual generation based on their memories of Iraq in the 1990s, but also on their current praxes which are grounded in a structural context radically different from the one that faced intellectuals who were living outside Iraq at the time of Ba'thist rule. This context allows them, despite physical displacement, to maintain involvement in social processes and political debates taking place inside Iraq.

2.1 Academic life and access to knowledge under the embargo

Through their narratives and secondary sources, let's first reconstruct their activities within informal alternative social circle in Baghdad in the 1990s.

My interlocutors all spent their university years in the Baghdad of the embargo, attending various colleges at Baghdad University mostly in arts, the humanities or social sciences. The context of their education was marked by a reduction in the freedom to travel in general (more particularly for graduates) and the impossibility that faced all of them to complete post-graduate studies abroad, unlike students from the period preceding the Iran-Iraq war. One recurrent observation made by analysts about the state of Iraqi universities and the content of higher education pertains to the drainage of material and human resources that started under the Iran-Iraq war and further declined under the embargo. Academic institutions were cut off from the rest of the world, the import of books and periodicals stopped, there was a sharp decline in the level of foreign language acquisition and in exposure to advances in scientific and other fields of knowledge, research was generally of poor quality and there was no epistemological production (Watenpaugh at al 2003: 19-20; IIST 2008).

Attendance was high despite the shortcomings of university education, and the limited career perspectives offered to university graduates (IIST 2008). Darles (2003: 66) sees this phenomenon as a desire for socialisation in response to frustration and boredom prevalent under the embargo. Moreover, as of 1992, in Baghdad public universities, several higher education programmes (*dirasat 'ulyah*), including doctorates in sociology and foreign languages, were introduced to make up for the lack of opportunities abroad. One of my interlocutors further recalls that:
> "A market for relatively cheap (originally 25,000 ID = US$ 10 per year) evening classes opened up leading to a wave of registrations from people of all ages, including mothers who were otherwise confined to homes, but also medical doctors and engineers who registered

for history or literature. Even some ministers attended evening classes, and several members of the mukhabarat *(secret police) not necessarily on duty. Education became an obsession. This happened not only because people were bored, but also because the Iran-Iraq war had prevented those compelled to go the front to study."*

Desire for learning, be it as an intellectual pursuit or as a means of socialisation, also ensured a high attendance to the main university libraries in Baghdad. The prevalent picture of university libraries, as they are portrayed in scholarly literature and expert reports about Iraq, is that they had undergone a process of qualitative and quantitative progress in the 1970s. In the humanities and the socials sciences, however, this progress was impaired by the establishment of a censorship system that banned a large number of Arabic publication and an even larger number of publications in foreign languages, be they works of fiction or novel theoretical and epistemological essays. Depletion touched all the disciplines during the Iran-Iraq war due to limited public funding. As of 1990, under the UN sanctions, it became nearly impossible to import books and periodicals.

To the best of my knowledge, little attention has been given to the one episode that brought a considerable supply of publications into Baghdad's public university libraries. As a result of the August 1990 invasion of Kuwait, books and other published materials were transferred from the University of Kuwait to the central library of Baghdad University, largely narrowing the gap of the two previous decades. The Kuwait collection was rich in translated contemporary works of fiction, together with recent theoretical works and academic references in foreign languages such as English, French, German and Spanish (IIST 2008; interviews). More research would be needed to evaluate the number of these publications, the procedures along which they were integrated into Baghdad university library, if screening by censorship authorities was performed at all, and in case it was, what were the criteria applied to publications in Arabic and foreign languages. It remains that, as of 1991, a whole collection of works of philosophy, linguistics, literary theory and cultural studies that had contributed to the so-called post-structuralist and deconstructionist turn in the social sciences in the 1970s and 1980s became accessible in al-Waziriyah central university library situated on the campus housing the faculties of humanities and social sciences at Bab al-Muazzam.

Direct access to these books was restricted to graduate students, who were the ones authorised to visit the central university library and use the lending system (IIST 2008; interviews), and to those few who mastered foreign languages, particularly French and/or English. The "ambiguity" of the system of control, that did not systematically communicated on censorship (Baran maintains that, in the late 1990s, it was impossible to obtain any official list of banned books or authors, and that there probably was none), therefore never drawing a clear boundary between what was permitted and what was forbidden, forced students to test the liberty they had to circulate these texts. To them, it was not clear initially if the books had been allowed in the library after screening by censorship, and were therefore authorised, or if the books had slipped through the interstices of the system of control due to the chaos of the post-Kuwait invasion, with the risk that their subversive potential would be noticed, sooner or later, by the security apparatus. This feeling of uncertainty did not last beyond the first couple of years, when it became increasingly obvious that the security apparatus was paying little attention to the circulation of written material coming from outside Iraq, even when directly critical of the regime, as long as they these texts did not inspire actual subversive actions.

2.2 The game of deconstruction

I will rely in the following section on combined narratives from seven of these former students who participated to one reading and debating group where members were particularly interested in French post-structuralist theories. Verbatim narratives (my translation when conversations took place in Arabic or French) appear in italic in the following sections.

The Ba'thists started strictly censoring books in foreign languages as of 1971 (*Time stopped in 1971*), in particular in the National Library. *In schools and universities, we kept reading time and again the classics of Arabic or foreign literature translated into Arabic.* On the other hand, it was almost impossible to find banned books in the market place, except at high risks.

Time started again after 1991 when the books stolen from Kuwaiti public libraries and museums were relocated in Baghdad's national and university libraries, while many found their way into the market place. Suddenly, there was a big book sphere in Baghdad.

In the 1990s, the central library of Baghdad university (*maktabat jama'at baghdad al-markaziyah*) was a meeting place for the intellectuals: *it was a beautiful place architecturally, reminding people how the Ba'th had taken care of intellectuals and education*; *it had a coffee shop, facilities and a garden. This is where our group would meet,* not inside the reading rooms where only graduate students had access and where silence was to be kept.

Two of my interlocutors remember how one day of 1991, in the coffee shop of the library, they heard some students sitting at a nearby table *using a new language with such words as "logocentrism" and "semiology"*. They approached them with questions about the meaning of these words and were openly given references of several books and names of authors to look for in the files of the library. My other interlocutors were initiate to the "new language" by friends who already frequented the reading group.

Books relocated from Kuwait included the English editions of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and *Covering Islam* (1981) (that had already circulated in Iraq in their Arabic translations), the works of the French philosophers who had inspired Said's deconstructionist approach, in particular Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault[3], and also the works of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari[4], and literary theorists like Tzvetan Todorov, Gérard Genette or the most recent works of Roland Barthes. The latter two are associated with the structuralist movement. According to my interlocutors, structuralist works had been banned from Iraqi public libraries after 1979 because "*structuralism kept individuals away from political engagement*" at a time when the regime needed to build up the support of the intellectuals for the war with Iran.

"*It was like a new game for us*". "*Us*" were a core group (*jama'ah*) of ten to fifteen students, with a majority of males, and, originally, only two indispensable females who were graduate students in the French department. The others were students in the departments of Arabic literature, foreign languages, linguistics, philosophy, sociology, history, media or film-making. Most males members of the core group had been on the front during the Iran-Iraq war. Males and females alike were from families with an urban Baghdadi background, usually with a high cultural capital, the scions of the secular modernity-aspiring middle-class of the 1950s and 1960s. The majority had been socialised

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[3] My interlocutors mentioned *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison (*1975) but also the three volumes of *Histoire de la sexualité* (1976 and 1984).

[4] They mentioned *L'Anti-OEdipe - Capitalisme et schizophrénie 1 (*1972) and *Mille Plateaux - Capitalisme et schizophrénie 2 (*1980).

at home in communist ideals. They all conceived of religious and ethnic diversity as elements of a specific Iraqi identity that had to be celebrated as culturally and historically meaningful (in this sense very much folkorized) but had to be subsumed under a national whole and a "*progressive*" political ideology and governance system.

More females were to join at a later stage, together with less regular participants. The larger group (or collective) did not have fixed boundaries: up to 50 people between 1991 and 2003 participated to its readings and debates with various degrees of initiation into the subversive dimension of these activities. Most participants were studying, or had a background in, social sciences or the humanities. Yet participants with a different educational profile were introduced to the group through evening classes they were taking in English, French or Arabic literature. For eg. a woman statistician, who joined the group in 1998 several years after she had graduated, was introduced by the teacher of French with whom she was taking evening classes and who was an ancient schoolmate of hers from the Syrian Orthodox Primary School: "*I had been so frustrated in college not to be able to talk about social issue and politics*". Recruitment was taking place according altogether to intellectual affinities, previous social relations, and family reputation therefore assuring that individuals with Ba'thist connections were kept at bay and that members of the collective had a high social, political and intellectual homogeneity.

The sequences of the game consisted in identifying the books available in the files of the library and borrowing them. This could be done only by graduate students. However in order to make the process participative ("*democratic*"), books were taken out of the library for a collective review of the table of content and a choice of chapters to translate or summarise. Those most skilled in the relevant languages would undertake translation (several came to being paid for it) and prepare photocopies to hand out to members of the group in preparation for another meeting where translation, terminology and content would be discussed. Some participants started taking evening classes to learn French or English so as to play the "new game" more actively. References in identified books represented sources from where to start a new research in the library files. Well before the members of the group felt they had exhausted the corpus of foreign texts available in the library, another activity undertaken by the reading group was to submit various writing produced in Iraq to a textual critique.

> "*The whole activity revolved around the al-Waziriyyah library. We needed dictionaries for the translation, but sometimes we would use photocopy machines outside the library because there was only one inside. Then we would meet in the coffee shop, or in the garden when the weather was good. Meetings had an overt and a covert agenda. After we started reading these texts, we believed that they had been allowed because they were critical of European colonial rule and Western political and intellectual domination. So this is what we discussed openly during our meetings, but our discussions also had underlying meanings. We were making implicit comparisons with Iraqi history and society, and especially with the Ba'thist system and Saddam Hussayn. There were times when we would just walk around the garden with one or two other members of the group, or meet in a private house, and then discussions were much more explicitly about applying the new language to the situation of Iraq. The* mukhabarat *never interfered with our activities.*
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> *An important aspect of our debates concerned the translation of terminology, of this new language into Arabic, but when debating the texts we usually used the original French or English words. Even outside of the reading group, we started using words borrowed from Derrida or Foucault to qualify Iraqi phenomena, and these words started being were used by other people, for example members of our families in everyday discussions at home. It*

became like a coded language that only some people could understand."

Consider the following examples:

Derrida's concept of "iterability" (*itérabilité*: from *itara*, other in Sanscrit) that disqualifies claims to an original purity and a genesis to replace them with original complexity, was discussed at length with implicit references made to the applicability of the concept to a re-reading of official historical narrative of the Iraqi nation and state. Several contemporary Iraqi literary texts were submitted to a "transformational" reading to identify what, in them, ran counter to their apparent systematicity (structural unity) or intended sense (authorial genesis). Members of the group who were students at the history department performed a similar critical reading of some major Iraqi historiographical texts. *As long as the French words were used, no people outside the group were likely to understand the critique they carried.*

The Heideggerian concept of "logocentrism" (ie the attempt to "ground the meaning relations constitutive of the world in an instance that itself lies outside all relationality"), qualified by Derrida as phallocratic, patriarchal and masculinist came to be applied systematically to discourses and representations of Saddam Hussayn, even in public places and settings. Again the French words "*logocentrisme*" or "*logocentrique*" were used.

The implicit hierarchies contained in the master political and historical narrative of the regime, pre and post-embargo, were uncovered by unsettling the overt dichotomies the discourse was built upon. Binaries were identified as intrinsically political, ie necessarily disqualifying one term: what such concepts as *al-'urabah* (Arabism) or *al-qawmiyah* (nationalism) implied in terms of exclusion of other implicit terms (Kurds, Jews, Iranians etc.); how categories naturalised by political and religious discourse, such as Shi'a or Sunni, were in fact political constructs that operated as classificatory oppositions, and so on.

Deleuze's argument about the equivalent value of sciences, art and philosophy - each different ways of organising the metaphysical flux, each essentially creative and practical - introduced members of the group to functionalist questions about history and identity. The veracity of the state-sponsored discourse on history and national identity was already disqualified among the intellectuals, but rather than rejecting it as irrelevant (ie "not true" as one terms of a binary), this discourse was objectified and submitted to critical analysis. Members of the group operated collective readings of state-sponsored material asking "How does this discourse function?", "What are its effects?" interspersing their discussions in Arabic with French concepts.

A last example is that of the works of Michel Foucault. The metaphor of the Panopticon (the way in which modern society exercises its controlling systems through visibility), such concepts as disciplinary and surveillance techniques and biopower, and the relations between power, knowledge and discourse were thoroughly discussed. Members of the secret services and other agents and technologies of the Ba'thist surveillance system came to be referred to systematically as "the Panopticon". Those who were "reading Foucault in Saddam's Baghdad"[5] equipped themselves with concepts to analyse the regime and its mode of domination on society that were to be used a decade later by social scientists like us.

It was not enough for us to describe, we applied ourselves to deconstruct power, domination, the dynamics of social forces and of history in Iraq. Davis (2005: 190) notes that, before the Iran-Iraq

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[5] To paraphrase Iranian professor Azar Nafisi, author of *Reading Lolita in Teheran: A Memoir in Books*. New York: Random House (2003).

war, "the Iraqis frequently rationalized authoritarian rule by commenting that at least Saddam was not corrupt and maintained an honest government (...) By the end of the Iran-Iraq War, all illusion about how the regime functioned, including the belief in Saddam's honesty, had disappeared". Darle (2003) sees anomie as emerging in spaces left void by the withdrawal of the state from its previous monopoly over sense making. My interlocutors remember themselves as the new generation of intellectuals that moved in to fill up this void in an attempts to rationalize and give sense to authoritarian rule not along the political and historical grammar of the Ba'th, but along another interpretation system, i.e. along a new language that gave them access to another level of reality. What they narrate is a very conscious engagement in producing a new realm of meanings. Many players in the game of deconstruction mastered the grammar and paradigms of Marxism, which they had learned within their family circles, inherited from parents who had been close to the ICP. They operated a shift from Marxism to post-structuralism within which the praxis of dialectic remained central. They did in fact produce a "counter-hegemonic" narrative, a "hidden transcript".

2.3 Breaking isolation, creating new communities

These readings, and the application of their paradigms to Iraqi history and individual experiences had a profound transformative influence on those members of the group who narrated to me the "game of deconstruction". They experienced connection with an international intellectual sphere that broke their geographical isolation. They also point at how the new paradigms revealed to them generational, intellectual and political gaps between themselves and the faculty in the various university departments. On the other hand, they recall their feeling that, by diffusing their ideas, they were forming a new community of knowledge and interpretation that extended beyond their restricted circle.

The search for knowledge and intellectual tools to make sense of one's experience became a quest in which the book was the material mediator endowed with power over the interpretation of reality, and over the experience of reality itself. Books were the objects of an intellectual fetishism that was reinforced by the ritualised manipulation to which they were submitted : "*Several of the books had never been open; pages were stuck to each other and had to be cut*"[6]. In the first instance, those who started the activities of the group felt like initiators who had privileged access to a novel and potentially dangerous knowledge. Insights from the sociology of secret societies might help uncover the mystique and rituals of the practices, degrees of initiation and compartimentalization of knowledge and information between members, and the building of group identity.

Although the supply of publications to Baghdad central university library was a one-time episode, and only brought those texts published before the 1990s, the French Cultural Center, that resumed its operations in Baghdad as of June 1997[7], offered access to new sources thanks to subscriptions to and back issues of a number of periodicals in French. Review articles allowed members of the group to keep up with what was being published in Europe and North American in a variety of fields in the social sciences and the humanities. For eg., in these years, the monthly *Le Magazine littéraire* included special issues and articles on Foucault, Deleuze, Pierre Bourdieu, Paul Ricoeur, and thematic issues on "Political philosophy", "Writing the war", "Exclusion in litterature and sociology", "Revolt", "Tolerance'" etc. Over a period of several years, by continuously feeding their readings of Iraqi reality with intellectual production from outside Iraq, members of the group breached the seclusion imposed by the terms of the embargo. If they were conscious of representing a marginal group within the Iraqi context they recall that they also perceived themselves as

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[6] A number of elitist Parisian publishers have maintained to this day the practice of selling their publications with pages that need to be cut by readers. .
[7] See http://www.senat.fr/questions/base/1998/qSEQ980105634.html.

belonging to a global avant-garde intellectual elite that was not bound by obsolete modernist paradigms and by a narrow view of nationalism.

On the other hand, the intellectual and epistemological distance with their educators at the university appeared unbridgeable. One of the authors of the report on the state of social sciences in Iraq (IIST 2008), who was a member of the "deconstructionist group" stated in an interview:

> *"At the faculty of political science the curricula had nothing about political philosophy in the wider sense, about conflict solving, political ideologies or comparative political systems. At the faculties of languages there was a total absence of such subjects as philology, the philosophy of art, the theory of literature, aesthetics or modern schools of literary criticism. At the faculty of history, there was nothing remotely related to theories on historical interpretation or historical writing. As for the faculty of philosophy, it was oblivious to deconstructionism, post-modernism, neo-pragmatism, etc. Lecturing and memorisation were the main teaching techniques at the exclusion of less authoritarian and more critical and argumentative approaches. And each time we were trying to introduce references to our new readings, we were accused of supporting Western influence. So we were at odds with our teachers, with the content of the curricula, with the teaching methods, and with the objectives of education. What we were doing in our reading group was like an alternative university. There were many other groups undertaking similar efforts in arts or literary critique".*

The gap was deepened by generational factors, prominent among them the experience of the Iran-Iraq war:

> *"Our professors at the university were nationalists, they had supported and participated in the Ba'thist revolution, they occupied all the positions and they were trying to marginalise the young generation with a critical mind. But us, we were the generation who had fought the war against Iran: we did not have anything holy, especially not the grand Ba'thist historical narrative and the ideologies. This was true for members of our circle, and also for other people of our generation who belonged to other intellectual circles in Baghdad, even some who had not totally given up Ba'thist principles."*

Indeed many participants to the "deconstructionist group" also frequented other circles of artists and intellectuals, therefore spreading to a much wider audience of students and young intellectuals the concepts, ideas, paradigms and methods of post-structuralism and deconstructionism.

> *"Some of us had exchanges with the circle of literary critiques who were meeting in cafés and organising literary and artistic meetings. Some members of our group were writing poetry and we had long discussions about modernism in Arabic poetry and literature. Many literary critiques, even if they wrote in [the official newspaper] al-Jumhuriyyah because they needed money, were also poets and using free verses. With them we avoided politically sensitive issues because many of the literary critiques were known to be Ba'thist or at least from Ba'thist families. But we were all from the same generation. We were all disillusioned, we had experienced traumatic things during the [Iran-Iraq] war. So we just discussed literary and cultural theories with them, semiotics, Orientalism, how deconstruction could be applied to literary texts, how classical Arabic and poetic forms were not allowing us to express our experiences of the war, of the isolation of the embargo etc. In other situations, like when we interacted with a circle of artists such as al-Najeen, we knew that we could be more openly critical. Many members of al-Najeen came regularly to our readings and discussions and the ideas discussed there had an influenced on their artistic work."*

Additionally, the deconstructionist reading circle was active in Iraq over a period of ten to twelve

years, and the core group, originally students, then entered professional life as of the mid-1990s, mostly as junior university faculty infusing their teaching with new concepts, approaches and methods, however carefully avoiding a direct critique of Iraqi politics.

2.4 Agency under constraint

Sami Zubaida (2006), in an article about the rise and fall of Iraqi civil society, contends that the Ba'thist regime nearly eliminated political and cultural spheres "which involved the active participation of members of all communities, not on bases of communal solidarity but on political and ideological commitments" (117). He defines his use of civil society as "the society of citizens, active agents in a public space, informed and involved in associations and parties, in contests and debates (...) the world of government functionaries, intellectuals, teachers, journalists, and artists, as well as modern sectors of business and the professions..."(117). Under the Ba'th, Zubaida writes, progressively "politics and civil society [were] totally incorporated into the authoritarian state" (128) destroyed in favor of "communalist formations", in particular based on kinship solidarities and patronage (129). Other authors (Hosham Dawod and Faleh Abdul-Jabar, Yitzhak Nakash) have described how and why the regime, especially in its later period, promoted "primordial" social groups such as tribes and religious communities, resulting in "destruction of politics [that] condemned each segment of the society to act either at an infra-political level, or at a meta-political level" (Bozarslan 2003).

In the years following the Gulf War, in a context where there existed no public sphere of contest and debate that could be invested by non-state political actors, Rigaud and Darle have argued that, although alternative intellectual and artistic circles represented spaces of transgression and counter-hegemony, there was no possibility of change coming from inside (Rigaud), and no possible "exit" from the system except through physical emigration or withdrawal within restricted social circles where catharsis and not politics was taking place (Darle). Baran believes that compromising with the political system was inevitable, and Darle sees a disqualification of the present and of Iraq as space/time of mobilisation (Darle 2003: 133). There are many indications that, for a large number of Iraqis, probably the vast majority, these propositions corresponded to their reality.

The memories of my interlocutors indicate however a different experience. They maintain that there existed spaces inside Iraq for alternative political visions to be imagined, contemplated, and enacted at the infra-level of state politics without falling back into "primordial" social groups such as the family, the tribe or religious communities that were being promoted by the regime. They recall seeking to create another political link inside spaces that evaded the lethal influence of the state based on a common understanding of processes of authority and domination through textual critique and discourse analysis. If we admit, with them and with Darle (who reflects along similar theoretical lines), that language is the primary element of domination, then uncovering the logics and grammars of domination represented an eminently political act. It is beyond the scope of this paper to enter into a discussion on the meaning of "the political" in the late Ba'thist context of domination. What matters here is how those engaged in a critique of domination gave sense to what they were doing. The following statement by one of my interlocutors during a collective discussion with other former members of the "deconstructionist group", of al-Najeen and of the literary critic group gained the approval of all those present:

> "In the 1990s, contrary to the 1980s, it was clear to us that the regime was allowing several intellectual fields to be open as a way to distract the attention of the intellectuals from politics. We were well aware that the contours of these fields were defined by the regime. But we invested the space left to us with activities different from the ones the regime expected. Deconstructionism, the critique of capitalism and the West, and alternative

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artistic production allowed us to remain not outside of politics but outside the sphere of power."

One issue of debate between my interlocutors is how they managed to remain outside the sphere of power through a process of testing the *"contours of the fields defined by the regime"* and *"playing within acceptable compromises"*. Focusing on artists, Rohde (2009 Chapt. 2.2) recalls that:

> "Artistic work in Iraq under the Ba'th regime meant walking a tightrope between selling one's soul and preserving artistic freedom. During the 1990s, artists survived by doing commissioned works for the regime like huge murals of Saddam Hussayn or by producing commercial art for sale and most likely created their own serious works at the same time, which would be exhibited in small but dedicated private galleries."

One of the former members of the circle of literary critiques, with a Ba'thist upbringing and many family members well integrated in the party and the state apparatus, but himself disillusioned by his participation in the Iran-Iraq war and subsequent drifts of the regime, offered the following metaphor: *"Iraq was like the wind shield of a car, and the regime was like the wipers with regular and predictable movements. We adjusted our moves to that of the wipers to avoid them. We knew exactly where the red line was."*

It was initially relatively easier for intellectuals in their formative years to maintain a radical refusal to consent because they were young and unknown, and therefore less likely to be solicited by agents of the regime to contribute to the celebration of the leader or to the production of a grand political narrative. As they grew older and, for several of them, started acquiring a reputation in the field of literature or the arts, or obtained positions in the academia, they did not always resist coercion or, at times, material gratification to compromise their principles. On the other hand, by applying their intellect to an understanding of the mechanisms of political domination, all of them had developed an understanding of the inevitability of compromises. The only alternative was exile, an option that they contemplated constantly but though of as only a last resort, if only because of the high financial and social costs incurred. Some of them did leave for economic reasons as of the late 1990s, taking up teaching positions in Libya or Jordan, sometimes eventually returning before the fall of Saddam Hussayn. Even the most radical ones, those who refused all along either to leave or to compromise, did not entertain the view of those who accepted limited dealing with the regime as traitors as long as they knew that these dealing were strategic or compelled and not premised on ideological affinities.

Members of the different alternative intellectual circles proved their own independent agency through the way in which they bargained their own position vis-à -vis the state system and decided on their own actions throughout the years. Some compromised, some grew more critical with the years - as was the case with the literary critique quoted above-, some radically refused to deal with agents of the regime, some left Iraq to look for economic resources outside but never disengaged intellectually from the Iraqi field and maintained contacts inside Iraq. Because they were not confronting the regime directly, they always had the possibility to leave however financially costly such an undertaking might have been. They were not physically expelled or forced to flee Iraq and did not develop an exilic outlook when they went to look for better livelihood opportunities abroad.

An analogy can be drawn between the situation of alternative intellectuals in Iraq in the last twelve years of Ba'thist rule and the experience of political incarceration, based on the works of Polymeris Voglis (2002), who focuses on communist political prisoners during the Greek civil war (1946-1949), and on that of Esmail Nashif (2008) who looks at identity and community formation among Palestinian political prisoners in Israeli jails since 1967.

Restricted or lack of information about the outside world, limited communication, censored correspondence and the media are all techniques of surveillance and isolation common to the prison universe and that of Iraq during the years of the embargo. As in Iraq, certain texts, and certain ideologies were banned in political prisons (Marxism in the Greek context of the 1940s and 1950s, Political Islam in the Israeli prisons of the 1990s and 2000s); however, some of these texts found their way among the inmates, whereas an overtly non-political language, that of "culture", was adopted by Palestinian prisoners as a subversive discourse. Both among political prisoners and alternative Iraqi intellectuals, a great emphasis was placed on education. In Greek or Israeli prisons, as among members of alternative intellectual circles in Iraq, collective reading and discussing were organised with patterns of activities and assignments of duties developed according to member's skills and knowledge. Nashif identifies the "pedagogical system" as the prominent signification structure of the Palestinian captives' community that became constitutive of one's identity. The "new language" of deconstruction and semiotics young Iraqi intellectuals were being introduced to echoes the experience of a Palestinian political prisoner on entering captivity in an Israeli detention center: "When I entered the prison for the first time I was so surprised (...) I had to deal with critical cultural issues. (...) So I joined in their discussions which I felt were far more sophisticated that the university's" (Nashif 2008: 72). Nashif offers a Foucauldian and Gramscian reading of domination, hegemony and resistance in Israeli prisons:

> "The harsh conditions of [Palestinian political prisoners'] captivity, which were intended by the Israeli authorities to resocialize Palestinians into docile and submissive bodies/souls, left the political captives with meanings that were as ruptures as the colonial prison space/time. The discourse of *thaqafah* (culture) became the site for the captives to resist the effect of the prison by constructing, through the praxis of reading/writing, counter-hegemonic symbolic and material fields of action. The creation, dissemination and propagation of *thaqafah* as a space between captives that transcended the space of the prison this became the empowered site for the Palestinians' revolutionary pedagogy." (73)

Political prisoners and alternative Iraqi intellectuals shared the conviction that education was part of the political struggle inside (the prison, or Iraq), and not only outside. Their discussions had explicit future-oriented purposes, as if confinement was only a parenthesis, as if sooner or later release would come. Political education was envisioned as a way to plan for lives ahead. "The future was the only perspective that political prisoners could have. The present was perceived as a transitory phase, a forced reality that could not last for long." (Voglis 2002: 174).

There are obvious limits to the comparison between socialisation and counter-hegemony in political prisons and in the context of authoritarian governance in embargoed Iraq that would require to be further delineated. One is that, unlike Greek and other prisons, were political parties - in particular, in various Middle Eastern contexts, Marxist and Islamist ones- played a socialising role by, among others, homogenized inmates with diverse social and cultural backgrounds (illiterate peasants, educated urbanites etc), recruitment into alternative intellectual circles in the Baghdad of the embargo took place along different lines by bringing together individuals whose social and cultural background was already rather homogeneous, and who belonged to same age group. Another difference is that Iraqi alternative intellectuals, unlike Greek or Palestinian political prisoners, did not undertake instances of direct collective struggle (hunger strikes, sit-ins, revolts etc.) against the system of domination. Because they were not a social isolate, repression would have been exerted beyond their group, in particular upon members of their families. This social group was therefore constituted mainly by a process of strategic compromise and avoidance of the apparel of political domination and control, and not through the experience of direct confrontation. It remains that the sociology of identity and community formation and political mobilization among political prisoners can offer a valid heuristic perspective and conceptual tools to better understand how, in a particular socio-historical context of power relations and relative confinement, certain spaces/times of

resistance coexisted concurrently with oppression and domination.

In the case of the alternative intellectual circles under Ba'thist and embargoed Iraq, agency was performed in the order of the discourse, by critically examining dominant ones, and by articulating new ones, be they textual or visual, artistic or pedagogical. Pragmatically, agency was also exerted by testing the limits of the the state's rules and unwritten regulations. Reading, writing, debating, producing art, performing literary and other textual critique, introducing new teaching methods and new theoretical approaches at university were all part of a common praxis[8] of resistance altogether to the hegemonic discourse of the regime, to the influence of a previous generation of "compromised intellectuals", and to the politics of international isolation. This praxis was part of a community-building process whereby a common epistemological – as opposed to ideological or religious – apparatus, a common syntax, a common field of textual references, common intellectual exercises, became signifiers of the group's identity. This apparatus served as a social marker that delineated a community and sites (the university library and garden, certain cafés and private houses etc.) liberated from the conditions of domination and seclusion. Through common praxis and episteme, a number of male and female Iraqis in their formative years established themselves as a distinct social group, a new intellectual generation, transcending professional fields of specialisation, rejecting political and other (tribal, religious, patrimonial) networks of patronage, and, more importantly, to the extend that this was possible for some, political identities attached to family histories.

These circles of sociability were a far cry from civil society defined along the lines of liberal political theory according to which, Rohde recalls "state and civil society are clearly separated entities, where the realm of politics is constituted in the arena of public debate and bargaining between various social actors on the one and the state on the other hand." (Rohde 2008 Chap. 2.2). They did not represent matrices for collective actions able to transform the political system. Nor did they have formal connections with exiled political parties or clandestine opposition groups operating inside Iraq. However, one has to agree with Rigaud (2001: 21) that "they were not insignificant". First because those actively engaged in the alternative production of meaning had the capacity to diffuse this meaning beyond the boundaries of the restricted social circles within which they were produced. Second because debates on meaning were taking place between members of various circles who shared what they conceptualised as secular, individualistic, anti-authoritarian and anti-imperialistic views but diverged, even if not openly, in their outlooks towards the regime and political ideologies such as Ba'thism or pan-Arabism in general. Among the intelligentsia coming of age in the Baghdad of the embargo, there was a sphere of intellectual debate within which politics was discussed in literary, artistic, philosophical and epistemological terms. The third reason why these circles of sociability were not insignificant is that they were not ephemeral: historical contingency allowed participants to these circles to transfer to another stage - that of the public sphere of political and social debate in post-Ba'thist Iraq - their definitions of what an Iraqi identity and a national project might be.

3. Deferred involvement

Although there was "infra-politics" (Scott 1990) - the necessary condition for overt, public confrontation with the regime - a political praxis was impossible in the space/time of Iraq under the hegemony of Saddam Hussayn's regime. But if, as Voglis reminds us, "Prisons are the places where opposition and resistance movements are schooled" (2002: 200), then one may ask the following set of question. Are those who were schooled as alternative intellectuals under Saddam able to act out

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[8] Praxis understood as actions upon reality in view of transforming social relations.

their visions in post-Saddam Iraq and under which conditions? If yes, what are their political visions and modalities of action? And, based on their narratives and memories, how do they conceive of the link between their current involvement and their intellectual resistance under Saddam?

3.1 Reshaping contexts and spaces of security and involvement

The removal of Saddam Hussayn's regime and a new political order characterized by violence as well as security and institutional vacuum have had sundry effects for the generation of alternative intellectuals by reshaping the contexts and spaces of their involvement and personal security.

On the one hand, the isolation of Iraq from the outside world has ended. Books are again accessible whether imported, translated or home produced by new publishing houses that have opened in Baghdad. The various spheres in which the generation of alternative intellectuals were engaged have experienced opening as new fields of expression and professional pursuits. Several dozen new independent newspapers and magazines began publication in Baghdad right after the regime change providing a space of free speech unknown elsewhere in the Arab world except for Lebanon. Many of the newspapers are associated with new or traditional political groups (Watenpaugh *et al* 2003). The international Arabic media (print, electronic or TV) has avidly recruited reporters familiar with the Iraqi terrain, many who did not have a formal training as journalists. There has also been a demand for skills and expertise from the part of foreign newspapers, and many of the alternative intellectuals, together with other university graduates, started working as translators, fixers or reporters for the foreign media, accessing areas of Iraq where security was problematic for foreigners. Many of the alternative intellectuals, writing in Arabic or English, have become active on the Iraq-related blogosphere which, as a medium of expression and debate, has kept expanding. Foreign grants have become available for plastic artists, film-makers, writers etc. for producing creative works. For young social scientists, the wave of recruitment that followed de-ba'thification in the universities, together with improved salaries, opened more broadly the doors of academia. International agencies such as the UN or bilateral aid organisations, together with NGOs from a number of North American and European countries, have also recruited Iraqi social scientists from the new generation as experts to produce policy-oriented research on Iraqi society. Finally, a new drive was created by international funding and new legislations that allowed the emergence of thousands of NGOs in the fields of humanitarian action, development, civil rights, democracy etc. Since 2003, foreign funding has also allowed many artists, journalists, academics and the emerging categories of experts and civil-society activists to participate in meetings, festivals, conferences or trainings abroad, generally in the USA or Western Europe.

On the other hand, intellectuals in Iraq have been facing new types of insecurity and restrictions on expression. Academic freedom was quickly marred by new forms of control imposed on teachers and on the content of textbooks and curricula as universities were turned into battle-grounds for political, ethnic and sectarian groups vying for influence, in particular through student unions (IIST: 2008). Unofficial censorship started being exerted by militias and other groups who have taken upon themselves the enforcement, including by violence, of a new moral, political and religious order. Non-partisan or secular intellectuals, artists and professionals who do not conform to this order in their behaviours, writings, teaching, cultural productions or professional practices have become targets of political and criminal violence. Large numbers of academics, artists, journalists, civil rights activists, and translators working with foreign armies or companies have been threatened, kidnapped or murdered. The crisis of governance into which Iraq plunged, the emergence of a new oligarchy, lasting foreign occupation, armed insurgency, growing sectarian strife, the rule of the militias, and levels of corruption and partisanship that also affect the sectors in

which the alternative intellectuals are engaged have engendered other types of withdrawal from politics and new exits. Starting in 2006, several thousands of professionals and intellectuals fled unsafe areas of the country, either to the Kurdish Autonomous Region or abroad. Others have managed to remain but have had to restrict their movements and spheres of action and expression to enclaves inside Iraq. Hence the importance, for them and others, of the development of electronic networks of information and communication that connect the ideas and expressions of individuals between and beyond these enclaves.

In the last few years, many of the alternative intellectuals have taken up residence in Damascus or Amman along several hundred thousands other Iraqis who have looked for security primarily in Syria and Jordan. Both cities have long histories of hosting Iraqi political opponents, artists, intellectuals and professionals. In Jordan, the older community of Iraqi exiles dates back to the 1958 coup that overthrew the Iraqi Hashemite monarchy. In subsequent decades, both Syria and Jordan welcomed various Iraqi political opponents, but also prominent exile writers and artists. In the years of the embargo, Jordan was also an outlet for Iraqi professionals and entrepreneurs who found employment or economic opportunities there. Except through covert political actions, the relations of these previous generations of exiles with Iraq was impeded by a series of structural factors pertaining to the nature of the Iraqi governance system, of bi-lateral relations between Iraq and neighbouring countries, and of the availability of means of communication. For many years, Syria maintained its border with Iraq officially closed. Political activism by a number of Iraqi opposition groups was supported by the Syrian authorities but the capacity of these parties to affect the domestic political situation in Iraq was extremely limited by the nationwide coverage of the Ba'th's coercion and control apparatus. Return visits to Iraq by political opponents were perilous and therefore extremely rare. Conversely, the border with Jordan was open universally to Iraqis before and after the 1990-1991 Gulf war. However, the Jordanian authorities only tolerated marginal political activism by Iraqi opposition parties whereas, on the other hand, the Iraqi secret services were able to carry out actions against Iraqi opponents on Jordanian territory. For their part, artists and professionals who had left during the embargo - at a time when the regime controlled and restricted exits from Iraq - were never assured to be able to leave Iraq again if they took the risk of returning. Finally, the Iraqi regime exerted surveillance over public means of communication (telephone and postal service) inside Iraq and across borders, drastically limiting communication between those "inside" and those "outside"[9].

In the post-Ba'thist era, political opponents have been able to invest the Iraqi territory and political arena returning from several of their former places of exile in the Middle East (mostly Iran, Syria and Jordan) and beyond (mostly North America and Western Europe). A reverse trend of migration composed, among others, of non-partisan intellectuals, academics and professionals has taken place towards traditional and new poles of Iraqi exile, particularly Damascus, Amman, Cairo, the UK, the USA and Sweden. However, the incapacity of the new Iraqi government and occupying powers to maintain security evenly on the Iraqi territory, together with a number of other factors, have reshaped notions of "inside" and "outside" that do not correspond today to the same political/territorial divisions as before. As much as people, its is borders that have been displaced with the result that there exists today a context of opportunities for intellectuals who are no longer physically in Iraq to be actively involved in spheres of debate and action that span national borders including those of Iraq.

The availability in Iraq of new communication technologies (mobile phone, Internet and satellite TV) makes Iraqis (and others) in Iraq, Jordan, Syria and more distant countries part of a common

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[9]   For developments on the situation of Iraqis in Syria and Jordan pre and post 2003 see Chatelard (2009a and 2009b) and Chatelard and Dorai (2009).

transnational space of communication within which Iraqi politics is discursively imagined and contested. For intellectuals, academics, professionals and other active categories of the population (such as entrepreneurs and businesspeople) spheres of public involvement are compartimentalised due to the uneven socio-spatial distribution of security inside Iraq and in neighbouring countries. Accessing information about developments in Iraq, and influencing social, political and economic processes inside Iraq are not necessarily a factor of being inside or outside national boundaries. Rather, knowledge of and the capacity to act on reality in Iraq depend, on the one hand, upon access to transnational networks of communication and circulation of ideas, goods and capital, and, on the other hand, upon access to systems of protection and patronage that allow individuals to be mobile between several locations inside and outside Iraq. For Iraqi businesspeople, economic investments in Iraq require secure bases in Jordan, Syria or the Kurdish Autonomous Region from where to manage operations in the centre and south of Iraq and to circulate funds within the international banking system. Likewise, political leaders in the government or the opposition, armed militia groups, civil society activists, international or national humanitarian and development organisations, and any other corporate group that ambitions to influence processes inside Iraq need regional rear-bases for security of operations and access to transnational networks of financial, material, technical or symbolic support.

Iraqis intellectuals in Jordan and Syria have more access to resources, social networks, cultural productions and more opportunities for interaction with foreign intellectuals than their colleagues who have remained in Iraq. There domestic mobility in impeded by insecurity, so is access to a number of cultural activities that are now taking place in several major cities. Travels abroad to attend professional events such as conferences or trainings remain limited because of the difficulty to obtain visas to Western countries, whereas interactions with foreign colleagues are restricted by the fact that few of the latter risk going to Iraq.

Under different configurations, Jordan, Syria and the Kurdish Autonomous Region play similar roles of safe frontiers or interfaces between Iraq and the rest of the world, places were a number of activities that have direct relevance to and impact on Iraq can be safely played out. In several cases, individual and collective/corporate strategies of security *cum* engagement with political, economic and social processes in Iraq are conducted through human, material and non material circulations between several infra-national locales (cities, neighbourhoods, regions) inside a transnational space that comprises at its core of Iraq, Jordan and Syria. Hence the need to conceptualise the space of action of a number of collectives and corporate groups in Iraq at different scales within transnational fields.

3.2 New praxes in a transnational Iraqi public sphere

Following a trend general in other societies of the Middle East (Bennani-Chraïbi and Fillieule 2003), civil society in Iraq now represents an alternative repertoire of action for individuals who shun party politics or who aim at circumventing states' control on political expression. In the views of my interlocutors civil society comprises of all intellectual, artistic, social and political pursuits that take place in a public sphere independent from the politics of the Iraqi government, the sectarian parties, and the occupying powers. Characteristic of the Iraqi public sphere are that, on the one hand, it is territorially fragmented between several enclaves of expression and action inside and outside Iraq and that,on the other hand, it relies heavily on technology-based networks of communication that span several national boundaries. It is at these scales that former alternative intellectuals situate their new praxes as civil society activists involved in the Iraqi arena that also encompasses communities in Amman, Damascus and elsewhere.

Moving away from conceptual analysis, I will now give a descriptive outline of some of these praxes that involve academics, journalists, artists and NGO activists who participated in alternative intellectual circles in Baghdad under the embargo, and who now position themselves transnationally both within professional fields and as civil society actors in an Iraqi public sphere.

The growing market for expertise about Iraq's politics, economy, society and culture driven by international agencies and NGOs has created a new professional field for social scientists, field researchers and translators. Several research centers have been created inside Iraq to respond to the demand for policy-oriented studies and surveys. Those with a competitive advantage have been established by Iraqi scholars living in Europe and the USA, who already had a network of connections in the Western academia, in Western and Iraqi exile political circles, and among international organisations. They have recruited Iraqi social scientists who had remained in Iraq during the years of the embargo, selecting those familiar with up-to-date methodologies and theories of social science research and who were not tainted by an association with the Ba'thist regime. In this context, several social scientists, who had been active in the "deconstructionist group" and had subsequently taken positions in various universities in Baghdad, started working on a number of studies commissioned by international organisations and NGOs. This production of knowledge has been framed by the political agendas and perceptions of funding agencies, and, beyond them, by the governments that fund the latter (some of these governments are militarily and economically active in Iraq). Initially, the rhetoric of good governance featured prominently: several studies were produced on democracy, civil, human and women's rights, empowerment of civil-society, rule of law etc. Since 2005, demand has shifted with new agendas that focus on sectarianism, ethnicity, tribalism, population displacement and so on. This is also the time when many of the most prominent social scientists had to leave Iraq.

Relocation did not necessarily bring about a cessation of their activities as experts, but rather a redeployment. Research centers have since opened branches in Amman, Kurdistan or Beirut. They manage responses to call for research proposals and the production of reports, receive payments from the organisations that commission the reports, generally in North American and Western Europe, and remunerate researchers spread across several locations in the Middle East. Whereas field-researchers gather data inside Iraq, keeping a low public profile and maintaining networks of protection in their respective communities, more prominent Iraqi social scientists located outside Iraq devise research methodologies and write up reports. Some have found positions in public or private universities in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon or Kurdistan. Others are sponsored by the Iraq Scholar Rescue Project, a programme run by the US-based Institute of International Education that brokers placements for persecuted academics in universities in the Middle East. Still others have been hired as policy analysts by the host of international agencies that operate their Iraq programmes from Syria, Jordan or Kurdistan. For those who have not found positions, short-term consultancies represent their main sources of income.

Location in countries near Iraq is strategic in terms of accessibility to information and resources. For those with a residence in Jordan, Syria or Lebanon, mobility to safe spaces inside Iraq remains possible with adequate security arrangements. Conversely informants (researchers, political actors, government officials etc) travel from Iraq to Damascus, Amman, Beirut or Kurdistan. Proximity with Iraq also endows experts with credibility and legitimacy vis-à-vis the organisations that pay for their knowledge. The days are gone when operational expertise on Iraq could be produced by long-term expatriates and exiles that maintained no direct connections with their country. Hence, unlike when Iraq was ruled by Saddam Hussayn, those academics turned experts who have looked for security in countries neighbouring Iraq balance ideas of further migration to the West with the financial gratification and professional recognition they derive from their proximity with Iraq.

The situation is equivalent for journalists. National markets for their skills in Jordan or Syria are narrow: media sectors are saturated and the absence of free press is frustrating. Their main professional resources are the electronic Arabic press and the print Iraqi media that rely on contributors who are inside and outside Iraq. Many of them also double as experts or teach media studies in academic institutions in Jordan and Syria. Like their social sciences colleagues, those better informed rely on networks inside Iraq and on connections with informants who visit from Iraq.

Damascus and Amman also play the role of frontiers and interfaces for Iraqi publishers, plastic artists, film-makers etc. The famous "Al-Mada" project, launched as a publishing house and cultural center in Beirut then Damascus in the late 1980s by Fakhri Karim, a member of the ICP, today relies on networks of contributors and funders, and on an audience and readership that span the borders between Iraq and other Arab states, reaching out to members of the Iraqi diaspora worldwide. Even if Karim, now President Jalal Talabani's chief adviser and a controversial figure, has relocated Al-Mada's center of activities in Baghdad (Mermier 2005: 101), the various media and cultural activities of the project could not be pursued if they were strictly confined within the borders of Iraq. Several of my interlocutors, although they maintain a critical position vis-à-vis Karim, regularly contribute to Al-Mada's publications and other activities. Their residence in Amman or Damascus offers them the possibility of expressing more direct critiques of political processes inside Iraq without fearing for their personal security. Yet their writings are widely read in Iraq and debated in various on-line discussion for a or on TV programmes that access audiences inside Iraq.

Examples could be multiplied of visual and plastic artist, writers and other intellectuals who have had to balance between staying in Iraq, settling in Jordan or Syria, or aiming at relocation in Europe, North America or Australia. Taking up residence in Amman or Damascus appears to many the best strategic compromise to access security and resources, and to gain or maintain recognition within an Iraqi public sphere of political, intellectual or artistic expression. One example is that of independent and critical film-making which, for people like Uday Rasheed or Ziyad Turkey[10], is compounded by threats from religious-oriented militias who denounce their activities as irreligious. Screening their films in Iraq is dangerous for themselves and their audiences. Hence the need for cross-border mobility and multiple locations where different segments of their activities can be carried out: filming takes place in Iraq, but pre and post production can take place alternatively in Jordan or Syria, whereas funding comes from international agencies on bank accounts in Amman or Damascus. On the other hand, thank to new technologies, audiences need not be localised now that films can be viewed online and downloaded, or copies circulated for private screenings.

If all my interlocutors view their activities within the framework of civil society, some have moved more specifically into the new field of NGO activism that was opened immediately after the regime change in Iraq thank to new legislative arrangements and funding from Western agencies and governments. Two of my women interlocutors[11] have founded an NGO that promotes dialogue and communal reconciliation between groups of widowed women from Sadr City (bastion of the Sadrists) and from the now Sunni neighbourhood of Adhamiyah. Both founders, former students at

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[10] Z. Turkey worked as director of photography on Uday Rasheed's Underexposure and directed "Under the Ashes: Iraqi Art and Culture in the Face of Sectarianism" (2007) featuring novelist Ali Bader, who has been living in Amman for many years, and who returns to Iraq on the occasion of the annual Al-Mada Culture Festival in Erbil (2007) with questions on the role of Iraqi intellectuals in society and their view of sectarianism.

[11] There is clearly a gendered path to involvement, albeit there is no gendered memory of subversion.

Baghdad University in the 1990s and occasional participants to the discussions of the deconstructionist group, and have followed training in advocacy and conflict resolution in the USA after 2003 within NGO-funded programmes. The one with spouse and children has sought residency in Jordan and has settled in Amman from where she shuttled to Baghdad, whereas the other one, who is single, lives in Baghdad but travels to Amman regularly. Their NGO is funded by grants from US-based NGOs and UN agencies.

3.3 A new intellectual generation against the dictatorship of sectarianism

All my interlocutors see their respective involvement in an Iraqi public sphere as forms of resistance to the fracturing of the society along primordial identity lines in a context where "*The dictatorship of sectarianism has replaced that of authoritarianism*". They see as particularly problematic that Iraq is now only perceived by the outside and the occupying powers through the ethnic and sectarian lens. The vision of Iraq they strive to promote is based on a combination of the legacy of the ICP's message of ethnic inclusion through the idea of diversity, on rejection of patriarchal values embedded in tribal ethos, and on aspects of political liberalism that have gained currency among them after 2003. They adhere to a political project of federalism on a territorial basis, on the establishment of the rule of law to protect the rights of individuals, on a reduction of the political significance of ethnicity and sectarian identities. They understand citizenship and nation understood within an Iraqi national context, and are highly critical of pan-Arabism as an ideology.

They sharply distance themselves from previous generations of exile intellectuals:
> "*We left Iraq because there is no security for us. But we will not reproduce the mistakes of the previous generation of intellectuals. The old generation of intellectuals spent their lives in a dream. Those who remained in Iraq dreamt that they were going to achieve something, and they could never do anything because the Ba'thist system was blocking any initiative. Those who left started imagining Iraq, but their imagination had little to do with reality. They became exiles, with nostalgia for an idealistic Iraq that never really existed. They never seriously though of going back to Iraq. And most have not even tried after Saddam fell. But really the blame is to put on those intellectuals who influenced the politicians. Most exile politicians were disconnected from reality in Iraq, or they had a political project that was exclusive, not inclusive. Now, those who came back from outside have invested the political stage in Iraq with disastrous results. As intellectuals, even if we have to withdraw from Iraq at the moment, we cannot stay silent, we cannot develop an exile mentality*".

The previous generation of exile intellectuals who inspired the politicians who now form the new oligarchy in Iraq is disqualified not for loosing touch with the reality of society and politics in Ba'thist Iraq, but for "*believing that they could project back into Iraq their groundless imaginations*". In fact, the praxes of the generation of alternative intellectuals turned civil society activists represent the exact reversal of the *modus operandi* forced upon exiled intellectuals under the Ba'th. The latter were closely associated with exiled opposition political parties in the production of alternative meanings on the system of domination in Iraq, but communication and the circulation of information was extremely restricted between exile communities and Iraq with the result that the "outside" misrepresented the "inside" in a context where the discourses on and representations of Iraq produced by the diaspora could not be publicly received, debated and contested by an audience inside Iraq. My interlocutors refuse to live their Iraqiness out of past memories only. They do not want to be like the intellectual generation of the 1960s and subsequent ones "*incapacitated by exile*".

Several agreed in a group discussion that, under violence, "*the intellectual cannot exert his role, but when violence is subdued, the word will regain importance. This is why it is important to keep the word alive and to spread it strategically, as a secret language under Ba'thist domination, or from sanctuaries today.*"

They aim at occupying available spaces of communication and action which, albeit, restricted in different ways, are not hegemonized or controlled as radically as they were under Saddam Hussayn. One of them said during a collective discussion:

> "*Unlike those 'exiles' who had no connection inside Iraq and came back after the fall of Saddam to create chaos, we got our training under Saddam. We are very experienced in identifying, occupying and expanding spaces of expression and action within restricted political and security situations. Under Saddam, we had to remain outside the sphere of power but we were doing politics. Now we are just outside the officials borders of Iraq but we are still right inside Iraqi society and politics. We have long known how to move to remain active within the borders of safety.*"

With resources and security available on the frontiers of Iraq, former alternative intellectuals pursue their own agendas by seizing the means the post-Saddam context of communication offers them: producing alternative meanings and diffusing a discourse critical of dominant political processes at work in Iraq, while deliberately remaining outside a partisan order which they equate with sectarianism, corruption, the failure to provide security, and complicity with the forces of imperialism. My interlocutors debate the respective responsibilities of the occupying powers and of Iraqi partisan politicians and former exiles in bringing about social fragmentation, conflict and insecurity. Although they agree on the responsibility of the USA and their allies, they are keen not to exonerate the Iraqis, "*all the Iraqis*". They consciously refuse to reproduce a discourse of enmity that lays the blame on one or the other segment of the Iraqi population or on an enemy from the outside (the USA, Israel or Iran), both lines of arguments belonging to a discursive regime which, one of them said: "*We have learnt to deconstruct in Baghdad in the previous decade*".

4. Concluding remarks

4.1 Reconceptualising intellectual involvement

It has now become possible - through interviews with actors- to document the activities of alternative intellectuals inside Iraq in the last decade of Ba'thist rule and to delineate the contours of individuals' and collectives' agency in relation to dictatorship. From a historiographical perspective, the testimonies of these intellectuals invite scholars to revise a number of prevailing views regarding the dynamics of intellectual and academic life in Iraq during the embargo and the origins of, and engagement within a civil society sphere in the post-Ba'thist era. There is no question that those who produced a liberal, secular and non-patriarchal counter-hegemonic discourse in the 1990s and early 2000s were politically incapacitated as Darle, Baran and Rigaud observed at the time. What begs to be explored further however are the multiple sites where this discourse was elaborated, the diversity of its modes of expression, its content, and its insertion within an Iraqi historical repertoire where intellectual dissent was tolerated[12]. Another important field of inquiry concerns the implications for the subsequent historical period of the schooling of an alternative intellectual generation *inside* Iraq where scholarship has so far seen either acquiescence to or compromise with authoritarianism, or isolation, exile and depletion of intellectual capital. As paradoxical as this may seem, the legacy of the Ba'thist period needs to be acknowledged beyond the last rupture in the country's political history to allow for the recognition that if there is any sign

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[12]   I thank Dina Khoury for bringing to my attention this aspect of intellectual dissent in Iraq.

of an emerging civil society in Iraq today it took roots as much among the expatriates as inside Saddam Hussayn's Iraq. Another apparent paradox needs to be confronted: the physical emigration from the "New Iraq" of liberal secular intellectuals, academics and other representants of a civil society does not necessarily signify their withdrawal from political involvement *within* Iraq. A metaphor like the "brain drain", implying a unidimensional and unidirectional movement, is unable to encapsulate such a complex phenomenon as the effects on Iraqi society of the physical displacement of secular and independent intellectuals and professionals. The radically new socio-spatial configuration of security in Iraq and at the regional level, that has emerged after the fall of Saddam Hussayn, together with the integration of the Iraqi territory within global information networks and free-market economy urge scholars to consider social and political dynamics inside Iraq in relation with regional and global geographical scales and linked to multidirectional and transnational human, communication, financial and technological fluxes. To understand the effects of emigration on the capacity of individuals and collectives to act upon realities inside Iraq, we need to reconceptualise notions of inside and outside, the relations between Iraqis in Iraq and those in other national territories.

4.2 from memories of intellectual dissent to memories of a pluralistic Iraq

My interlocutors, as former members of the "deconstructionist" and other alternative intellectual collectives active at the margin of politics but *within* Iraq during the embargo, have shared a common experience upon which they have developed a socially-framed collective memory. They share memories of the embargo, of the Iran-Iraq war and the 1991 *Intifadah*, memories as young intellectuals who withstood conflicts and deprivation, who witnessed first-hand how the regime transformed the society by undermining a sense of a unitarian Iraqi identity and by gradually destroying public spheres and civil society. Their collective identity is that of a community of interpretation and praxis in a specific space/time, a product of the contingent encounter between the writings of the major post-structuralist thinkers of the 1970s and 1980s and the political history of Iraq in the decades under Ba'thist rule. In retrospect, they remember the time of the embargo as that during which they were becoming the new intellectual generation, one that was acquiring a set of epistemological tools to discursively resist the system that dominated and divided the people of Iraq and who practiced dissent outside the sphere of power rather than outside the country. Today, while they aim at resisting other contexts of marginalisation and a sense of displacement, they often commemorate their formative years as a means to establish their claim of constituting an intellectual generation different from the one who was shaped by exile and, they believe, who was disconnected from Iraqi realities.

My interlocutors analyse their intellectual journeys and alternative praxes in Iraq during the embargo as a a liberating process that became an incentive for subsequent involvement with a view to act on social and political reality in their country. Their narrations of their formative years in Baghdad are self-conscious and locate themselves as interventions designed to shape post-Ba'thist Iraqi society and to counter narratives of fragmentation, especially sectarianism. Their past experiences are, so they say, what makes their claims more legitimate than those of former exiles to participate in the definition of the present and future of Iraq. In this sense, expressing their collective identity around the recollection of their memories of intellectual dissent is a question of self-recognition and recognition by others.

In contrast with Darle's interlocutors, members of these alternative intellectual circles who have managed their reconversion into civil society activist in transnational spaces succeeded in building for themselves "a system of orientation sufficiently efficient to allow them to consider the present without major contradictions, to recollect their past and to project themselves into the future" (Darle

2003: 129). They deferred in time and space Todorov's injunction: "To keep one's dignity, one has to transform a situation of constraint into a situation of autonomy" (quoted by Darle 2003: 69).

Importantly, their memories of their formative years in Baghdad are overlaid on a continuum of generational memories transmitted within family and friendship circles inside Iraq and recollected in the exilic literature of the Ba'thist years. My interlocutors are offsprings of the generation who spent their formative years under Qasem (1958-1963), the "most open and ideologically diverse [period] in the modern history of Iraq" (Zubaida 2006: 119) when the Communist Party mobilised widely, and artistic and journalistic life was intense. Memories of a pluralistic, secular, socially progressive, politically committed and modernity-oriented social class have been passed on to the intellectual generation of the 1990s by their parents and grand-parents who were the civil society of the 1960s Sami Zubaida wrote about as the "government functionaries, intellectuals, teachers, journalists, and artists, as well as modern sectors of business and the professions."(*Ibidem*: 117).

It is within such a continuum of memory that my interlocutors see themselves as bridging between the generation of their parents, who were active in party politics within an Iraqi public sphere, and the Iraqi youth of today - whose parents have not been part of the pluralistic modernity of the 1960s, or have not been in a position to transmit their memories of that period- and for whom the dominant interpretive framework is that of sectarian politics in a conflict-ridden Iraq. Through their artistic productions and various social praxes, my interlocutors aim to be "carriers" of the memory of a certain Iraq in which dictatorship and the fragmentation of society would only constitute a parenthesis. They have deferred (in the sense of transferred or carried apart) both their own involvement in an open national political sphere and their parents' memories of a time when this involvement was possible.

Arguably, for today's civil society activists, the shared memory of their subversive activities in intellectual circles in the 1990s helps create a sense of temporal continuity and national unity in the fragmented space/time of praxis and memory which is that of the "era of diaspora and national reconstruction". Put otherwise, a common experience of intellectual dissent in a context of extreme confinement and political domination constitutes Iraq as a "realm of memory" for this group of intellectuals and motivates, at least discursively, their current commitment to the present and future of a non-sectarian, secular, pluralistic and democratic Iraq. It is to this realm of memory that today's civil society activists keep referring to resist an exilic predicament despite experiences of violence and insecurity, departure from Iraq under various levels of constraint, and the possibility they would have to seek emigration to a Western country.

Within this realm of memory, the University of Baghdad plays a highly symbolic role, a site of transmission and resistance that can be associated most readily with Pierre Nora's concept of "site of memory", that is to say not only a "site that is remembered" a but site where "memory is at work". In Nora's approach, sites of memory are those to which affects and emotions of large collectives are attached. In the case of nations, collective memories are crystallised on such sites beyond the particular histories of families, regions, social classes, generations, and other infra-national groups. Following Nora, an Iraqi site of memory could be envisioned as one that brings together the various segments of a political community (if not necessarily a nation) across families and lineages, religious and political outlooks, ethnic traditions, rural, urban and class divides, generations and ruptures in political history, those in the diaspora and those who are in Iraq. It could also be envisioned as a site where the contours of an Iraqi identity are delineated by setting it as different from the identity of other political communities and large cultural collectives, particularly in relation to Arabism.

Baghdad University, that was founded as a remarkable exemple of modernist architecture under the monarchy and considerably expanded and endowed under the Ba'th, may stand as such a site. It provided social and economic promotion and national integration to several generations of Iraqis from a variety of backgrounds who came to form the country's middle class. It represented, for decades, the pinnacle of secular higher education in the Middle East and attracted students from across the rest of the Arab world. Iraq was then seen as leading other Arab countries in the fields of learning, scientific achievement and creative production. This position started being weakened during the Iran-Iraq war, but was only jeopardized seriously under the embargo.

Within the university, the central library appears in the memory of my interlocutors as a holy of holies, the inner sanctuary where rituals of a veneration of knowledge continued to be allowed even in the worst days of Saddam's dictatorship. The looting and burning of this shrine after the fall of the regime (Spurr 2005) has become the symbol of a barbaric take-over, an *auto-da-fé* marking the transition between a secular and a religious order. For my interlocutors, Baghdad University library stands as a metonymy for Iraq as a country, as a history and as a project: what Iraq has been, what it is now and what it could be again.

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