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An Overview of Syrian Art Production over the Last Decade

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Stefan TARNOWSKI

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DOSSIER THÉMATIQUE :

Knowledge Production in Times of Fragility: An Overview of Syrian Art Production over the Last Decade

MARCHING BACKWARDS INTO BATTLE: On the Use of Dignity / كرامة in the Syrian Revolution

Stefan Tarnowski¹

Résumé | Le concept de dignité prend une tournure singulière lorsqu'on considère son double usage par le régime et ses opposants en Syrie depuis 2011. À l'image de Bachar al-Assad, la dignité semble avoir deux «corps». L'un est associé à la période des révolutions arabes, des événements que certains chercheurs espéraient marquer la fin de la post-colonialité (DABASHI Hamid) ; l'autre est lié à la lutte anticoloniale pour la dignité incarnée dans l'État postcolonial (HARKIN Juliette). En s'appuyant sur Quentin Skinner et Reinhard Koselleck, cet essai propose une méthode pour analyser la continuité lexicale et les évolutions sémantiques dans le lexique de la révolution syrienne. À travers la méthode de RG Collingwood consistant à raisonner à rebours du problème à la solution, j'analyse pourquoi la dignité, et non un autre terme comme la démocratie, est devenue une revendication centrale de la révolution syrienne.

Mots-clés | Dignité, Syrie, Printemps arabe, Histoire conceptuelle, Rhétorique politique, Anthropologie de la révolution.

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Abstract | The concept of dignity takes on a strange complexion when thinking through its double use by both the regime and its opponents in Syria since 2011. Like Bashar al-Assad, dignity seems to have two bodies. One belongs to the period of the Arab revolutions, events that some scholars once hoped would herald the end of postcoloniality (DABASHI Hamid); the other to the anticolonial struggle for dignity enshrined in the postcolonial state (HARKIN Juliette). Drawing on Quentin Skinner and Reinhard Koselleck, the essay proposes a method for analysing lexical continuity and semantic shift in the lexicon of the Syrian revolution. Through RG Collingwood's method of arguing back from the solution to the problem, I analyse why dignity, and not another term such as democracy, became a central demand of the Syrian revolution.

Keywords | Dignity, Syria, Arab Spring, Conceptual History, Political Rhetorics, Anthropology of Revolution.

The proper meaning of a word ... is never something upon which the word sits perched like a gull on a stone; it is something over which the word hovers like a gull over a ship's stern.

– RG Collingwood (1938)

Marching Backwards into Battle

25 March 2011, the third Friday of the Syrian revolution. Following a practice widespread throughout the Arab Spring of assigning each Friday a revolutionary moniker, the day was named the Friday of Dignity.¹ Not long afterwards, the slogan of the Syrian revolution would crystallise into three demands – perhaps ideals – *hurriyah*, *karāmah*, *‘adālah*; translated as Freedom, Dignity, Justice.

11 December 2011, Local Coordination Committees (LCCs) call a Strike for Dignity (*idrāb al-karāmah*).

“Strike for Dignity: begins at dawn, Sunday, 11 December [2011]:

Until the withdrawal of the army from the cities

And until the release of the prisoners ...

Look, you are important ... support your homeland, support your strike.”²

The Strike for Dignity was an expression of nonviolent dissent against Bashar al-Assad and his violent crackdown on peaceful protests.³ The LCCs posted a series of short video clips of shop owners pulling down shutters, and the security services (*mukhabarāt*) forcibly reopening them.⁴ According to Juliet Harkin⁵, although these didn’t match the kinds of organised forms of trade union activism linked to the 2011 Egyptian revolution, they still brought together a broad coalition of the public and private sectors, including teachers and merchants.⁶ These three incidents give an indication of dignity’s role in the rhetoric of the Syrian revolution, and its centrality to demands formulated by revolutionaries. Dignity was central to the uprising’s discursive constitution, and to the revolution’s conception of itself in opposition to its antagonist, the regime (*al-nizām*). Yet,

1- There are various accounts that describe the (sometimes antagonistic) process of revolutionaries naming different Fridays. Cf. YAZBEK Samar, *A Woman in the Crossfire: Diaries of the Syrian Revolution*. Translated by Max Weiss. London, Haus Publishing, 2012; YASSIN-KASSAB Robin, AL-SHAMI Leila, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*. London, Pluto Press, 2016; MUNIF Yasser, *The Syrian Revolution: Between the Politics of Life and the Geopolitics of Death*. London, Pluto Press, 2020; AUBIN-BOLTANSKI Emma, KHALBOUS Oussama, “Characterizing the Engagement of Syrian Women in the Revolution: Different Uses for the Word حرّان (Free Women),” *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, [online], 2022, vol. 15, no. 4, [Accessed November 2024], p. 467–479. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1163/18739865-01504010>.

2- Quoted in Harkin 2018, 178, translation modified.

3- MAZUR Kevin, *Revolution in Syria: Identity, Networks, and Repression*. Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021, p. 200–203.

4- Al Jazeera covered the strike, editing together the user-generated content for its satellite TV report (Al Jazeera 2011).

5- HARKIN Juliette, “Demands for Dignity and the Syrian Uprising,” In HINNEBUSCH Raymond A., IMADY Omar (eds.), *The Syrian Uprising: Domestic Origins and Early Trajectory*, London, Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2018, p. 178–179.

6- I’m grateful to Thomas Pierret for suggesting I flesh out this particular episode.

strikingly, the popular usage of the term dignity emerged at a time when the word was also used as a central justification by the regime, in particular for its anti-imperialist credentials.

At the start of the Syrian revolution, while dignity was lodged at the centre of revolutionary rhetorics, the Assad regime *also* continued to justify four decades of rule in terms of the dignity it bestowed on the Syrian people. In fact, even opponents of the Assad regime had to contend with mixed feelings towards the consensual aspects of regime rule and legitimacy signified by the term dignity. Bashar al-Assad indicated as much in a notorious interview with the *Wall Street Journal* given days before the first protests broke out in Deraa. With Ben Ali toppled in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt, and with the Arab revolutions well underway, Assad audaciously predicted that Syria would remain untouched by the tide of protests:

“Internally, it is about the administration and the people’s feeling of dignity, about the people participating in the decisions of their country. It is about another important issue. I am not talking here on behalf of the Tunisians or the Egyptians. I am talking on behalf of the Syrians. It is something we always adopt. We have more difficult circumstances than most of the Arab countries but in spite of that Syria is stable. Why? Because you have to be very closely linked to the beliefs of the people. This is the core issue. When there is divergence between your policy and the people’s beliefs and interests, you will have this vacuum that creates disturbance. So people do not only live on interests; they also live on beliefs, especially in very ideological areas. Unless you understand the ideological aspect of the region, you cannot understand what is happening.”⁷

What did Bashar al-Assad mean by “the administration” of “people’s feeling of dignity”? What were the “beliefs” that he claimed people lived on? And what, in his view, was “the ideological aspect of the region”?

Lisa Wedeen, who so effectively interrogated the ways Syrians navigated the absurdities of Hafez al-Assad’s official cult, nonetheless argued that there were “at least three widely shared beliefs of political life”:

“First, the regime defends Syrians against Israeli threats; second, the Golan Heights, land seized by Israel in the 1967 War, must be returned to Syria; third, Assad’s rule has produced unprecedented stability in Syria, which is desirable. The example of the Lebanese civil war is a chilling reminder of the consequences of not living under a strong state.”⁸

These beliefs didn’t exhaust regime rhetoric, as Wedeen details in her exploration of the *incredible*, *incoherent*, and *non-consensual* aspects of regime rhetoric,

7- WALL STREET JOURNAL, “Interview with Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 2011, sec. World News, [online], [Accessed November 2024]. Available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703833204576114712441122894>.

8- WEDEEN Lisa, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1999, p. 7.

such as the claim that Assad was the country's premier scientist, pharmacist, or astronaut. It was by analysing the "administration" of these absurd rhetorics by the cult that Wedeen formulated the influential theory of acting "as if" – the politics of internal (dis)belief untouched by external compliance. Less commented on is that Wedeen also enumerated three consensual beliefs – anticolonial struggle, liberation of Syrian territory from Israeli occupation, and stability – all linked to the regime's use of the concept of dignity.

In March 2011, just a few weeks after the start of protests, Charif Kiwan, a founding member of the anonymous collective Abounaddara and their spokesperson, summed up the power of these consensual beliefs underpinning what Bashar al-Assad had called "people's feeling of dignity". While much of the commentary prophesied the imminent fall of the regime and transition to democracy that would inevitably ensue, Kiwan published an article in *Le Monde* that struck a disquietingly sombre tone. Riffing on Kantorowicz's theory of kingship, Kiwan described Bashar al-Assad as having "two bodies: the body of a tyrant, and the body of a resistance fighter." While the first body is dying, just as Ben Ali's and Mubarak's had, the second "still shines bright, incarnating a national aspiration nourished by nostalgia for natural Syria, which was butchered by the villains of Sykes-Picot in 1916." The second body can be used dishonestly to disguise the first, Kiwan claims, but there are important reasons why, unlike Ben Ali and Mubarak, it's still "the object of a certain amount of national pride".

"Born of humiliation accumulated since the Arab defeat in June 1967, and which made the young leader with blue eyes the *generalissimo* of his state, and the only Arab leader capable of standing up to the old Crusader leader, George W Bush. The only Arab leader, also, who supported the suicide guerrillas of Hezbollah and Hamas, who were supposed to pave the way for the liberation of Jerusalem. The only Arab leader, lastly, to claim to be working for the advent of a single and indivisible Arab nation, rid of the Zionist entity. The king, therefore, is not in his death throes. He has only to conceal his diseased, tyrannical body by disguising himself as a resistance fighter besieged in a Syrian Massada he's built to his measure."⁹

It's possible to think about the description of Bashar al-Assad's two bodies in terms of the overlaying of two temporalities. The first, the loathed dying body of the tyrant belongs to the period of the Arab Spring, to the period of the revolution for dignity. The second, a shining object of national pride, belongs to what one might call, to misappropriate a concept from Ann Stoler (2016), the "durability" of anti-imperial and anticolonial struggle after postcoloniality in Syria.¹⁰

9- KIWAN Charif, « Les Syriens ont défié et brisé la loi du silence », *Le Monde* [en ligne], Mars 2011, [consulté Novembre 2024]. Disponible sur : https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2011/03/31/les-syriens-ont-defie-et-brise-la-loi-du-silence_1501276_3232.html.

10- For the anticolonial notion of dignity – "this dignity [which] has nothing to do with 'human' dignity" – born from the violence of colonial "humiliation", see the canonical account by Fanon (FANON Frantz, *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York, Grove, 2002 [1961], p. 9.)

Like Assad himself, the concept of dignity seems to have two bodies. One belongs to the revolution for dignity and the period of the Arab revolutions, events that some scholars once hoped would herald the end of postcoloniality¹¹; the other belonged to the anticolonial struggle for dignity enshrined in the postcolonial state. As such, the concept takes on a strange complexion when thinking through its double use by both the regime and its opponents since 2011. It resembles Quentin Skinner's argument that even the most radical revolutionaries can be "obliged to march backwards into battle" by choosing an "existing favourable term" from the lexical arsenal of their opponents to describe and evaluate the virtue of their own cause.¹² The point is easily occluded when thinking with the "semantic shifts" or even "ruptures" favoured by Reinhard Koselleck's (2004) theories of intellectual history: that it can be strategically attractive to adopt an antagonist's term and put it to new uses precisely because it allows an actor to exploit the affinities of an older political grammar.

On Dignity

As Juliette Harkin notes, the fact that dignity is such a ubiquitous concept in Syria – popping up in speeches by Bashar al-Assad and saturating protests against his rule, used in demands for human rights by secular activists, as well as in the declaration by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi establishing a Caliphate – means that it "has tended to be regarded as too vague" to merit scholarly attention. Harkin is a notable exception. She has argued that "the very fact that all sides in the conflict feel the need to invoke dignity itself attests to the power of the concept, especially as unleashed in the latest Arab revolutions"¹³. This article builds on her insights and examples, although it does so to broach another set of questions: Why choose an antagonist's term to evaluate one's struggle? And why choose dignity rather than some other term, such as democracy?

Given the concept's ubiquity and the contradictory uses it's put to, it's tempting to argue that *karāmah* simply has no equivalent in English. In other words, the problem is one of *translatability*. This line of argument, not uncommon for anthropologists or intellectual historians, would go that the ubiquity and contradictions of *karāmah* are a feature of its position within a system of moral and political thought alien enough to contemporary Euro-American cosmology as to have no equivalent. Therefore, "we cannot hope to capture it except in the form of an extended and rather approximate periphrasis"¹⁴.

However, a Syrian linguist as gifted and passionate as Nisrine al-Zahre, writing an essay in Arabic on her fruitless search for a "definition" of *karāmah*, has lamented that there is "no definition of the concept of dignity". The term, she concludes, is "primitive", the "negation" of life under Assad.

11- DABASHI Hamid, *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism*. London, Zed Books, 2012.

12- SKINNER Quentin, *Visions of Politics: Regarding Method (Volume 1)*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 149-150.

13- HARKIN Juliette, "Demands for Dignity and the Syrian Uprising", *op. cit.*, p. 174-175.

14- SKINNER Quentin, *Visions of Politics: Regarding Method (Volume 1)*. *Op. cit.*, p. 48.

“[Dignity] is simply the antithesis of living under Assad’s rule. In other words, it is politically, historically, and emotionally linked to life and existence under the Assad regime. Dignity ... is the antithesis of Assad’s “abjection” (*radhl*). It is the opposite of beating, blindfolding, “breaking the spirit” (*kasr al-‘ayn*), and smearing a person in their own filth and that of other bodies. In fact, dignity as a predicate in Syria has been regressing further and further into a pre-political space, as well as a pre-moral, and even pre-legal space. It is the antithesis of the animal in its crude state, as described by Primo Levi in his image of the “Musselman” surrendered to an animal destiny in the Nazi concentration camps: “Death before humiliation.” It is a foundational and epic moment that inaugurates a separation between man and animal in the simplest and most expressive saying of what happened in Syria: “I am a human not an animal.”¹⁵

It’s striking that al-Zahre’s frustration is limited to uses by Syrian revolutionaries and opponents of the regime. But the proposal of this essay is to think through the perplexing aspect of the word’s use as both a central demand of the Syrian revolution and a historical justification for rule in regime rhetoric. The problematic, in short, cannot be solved by resorting to claims of alterity or untranslatability.¹⁶

How then to give an account of a concept that’s regionally ubiquitous, historically prominent, *and* central to an ongoing struggle? If the contemporary scope and scale of dignity’s usage push ethnographic methods to their limit, spanning a vast region, and uprisings that have been sparked and quelled for over a decade; then the “ongoingness” of those usages also stretches beyond the usual disciplinary remit of intellectual historians. As such, the essay is an attempt to draw methodological and theoretical insights from each in order to attempt to make up for the other’s limits.

The point of this essay is not to synthesise a single “definition” of dignity, in the sense of finding the term’s “essential meaning”. As such, I avoid drawing on the concept of dignity’s career in the Enlightenment tradition, where it has been

15- AL-ZAHRE, [author’s translation], 2021; Reference to a famous YouTube clip from 2012, Cf. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cIKfT6yF7Gs> [accessed 11 January 2023].

16- I explored a further complication in an earlier version of this essay: As in an early Abounaddara article demanding a “right to the image” without yet using the word dignity, it’s also possible to trace the emergence of a conceptual space before a word has been applied to it. (ABOUNADDARA, « Respectons le droit à l’image pour le peuple syrien », *Libération*, 22 janvier 2013, [consulté Novembre 2024]. Disponible sur : http://www.liberation.fr/planete/2013/01/22/respectons-le-droit-a-l-image-pour-le-peuple-syrien_875915; Cf. HACKING Ian, *The Social Construction of What?* Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1999).

placed as an ideal alongside others such as freedom, equality, and democracy.¹⁷ As Quentin Skinner has argued, searching for atemporal definitions of political concepts is both methodologically and theoretically flawed:

Rather we must study all the various situations, which may change in complex ways, in which the given form of words can logically be used – all the functions the words can serve, all the various things that can be done with them. The great mistake lies not merely in looking for the “essential meaning” of the “idea” as something which must necessarily “remain the same,” but even in thinking of any “essential” meaning (to which individual writers “contribute”) at all. The appropriate, and famous, formula – famous to philosophers, at least – is rather that we should study not the meanings of the words, but their use. For the given idea cannot ultimately be said in this sense to *have* any meaning that can take the form of a set of words which can then be excogitated and traced out over time. Rather the meaning of the idea must *be* its uses to refer in various ways.”¹⁸

Skinner argues that studying the different ways that words can be used at specific times and places reveals that there’s never an “essential meaning” to a concept that various philosophers, intellectuals, statesmen, and militants have contributed to, and whose job it is for historians of ideas to uncover. However, there are rules for use at any given time, which Skinner calls “criteria for use”, a grammar that a word follows within what Wittgenstein calls a “language-game”. The problematic, however, of dignity’s double usage is only partially addressed by

17- Dignity is hardly unchallenged in the Enlightenment tradition. Schopenhauer famously dismissed the concept “once uttered by Kant” as the “shibboleth of all empty-headed moralists”. (SCHOPENHAUER Arthur, *On the Basis of Morality*. Trans. E.F.J. Payne. Indianapolis, Hackett Pub, 1998, p. 100.). Recently, Macklin and Pinker have argued that the Kantian concept of dignity is redundant. They argue that both dignity and autonomy stem from the famous principle in Kant’s *Groundwork* (2012) that human beings should be treated as ends and never merely as means. (MACKLIN Ruth, “Dignity Is a Useless Concept,” *BMJ: British Medical Journal*, December 2023, vol. 327, no. 7429, p. 1419–1420; PINKER Steven, « The Stupidity of Dignity », *The New Republic*, 2008, vol. 28, no. 05.2008, p. 28–31; KANT Immanuel, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Trans. Mary Gregor. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012.). In conceptual genealogies within this tradition, scholars argue that dignity only came to have meaning once the differentiated statuses of Feudalism associated with the term “honour” had been stripped away in favour of a bourgeois egalitarian ideal of universal rights (BERGER Peter, « On the Obsolescence of the Concept of Honor », *European Journal of Sociology/Archives Européennes de Sociologie/Europäisches Archiv für Soziologie*, 1970, vol. 11, no. 2, p. 339–347; ROSEN Michael, *Dignity: Its History and Meaning*. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2012.). Waldron makes two genealogical interventions. First, he outlines that the word Kant uses frequently translated as dignity is *Würde*: “But the two words have slightly different connotations. *Würde* is certainly much closer to worth than our term dignity is.” Following this philological clarification, Waldron argues that before dignity became a universal right, it emerged as a fundamentally comparative demand. He gives the example of the right not to be tortured under arrest. In England under Feudalism, this was an exclusive privilege of the aristocracy. Dignity, in other words, is a bourgeois demand to universalise an aristocratic privilege, that exclusive privileges become universal rights. In contemporary political jargon, demanding dignity would be closer to “levelling up” than stripping back to a bare humanity. Therefore, “rights” still contain an idea of elevated status implicit in the term dignity. (WALDRON Jeremy, *Dignity, Rank, and Rights*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 13).

18- SKINNER Quentin, « Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas », *History and Theory*, 1969, vol. 8, no. 1, p. 37.

the largely synchronic approach to speech acts found in Skinner's methodological essays. Coupled, therefore, with Skinner's Wittgensteinian point about studying uses instead of meanings, and his Austinian analysis of intention in speech acts, this essay will also trace a conceptual shift as the term dignity has travelled through time, is marked by time, and, I argue, marks a period of time. I combine Skinner's methodological insights with Koselleck's *Begriffsgeschichte*, the method of conceptual history directed at uncovering shifts in "the semantics of central concepts in which [the] historical experience of time is implicated"¹⁹—conceptual shifts that track ruptures in political, historical, and social frameworks such as modernity, or in this case postcoloniality and its aftermath.

This raises a theoretical and methodological problem. While both Koselleck and Skinner develop methods for the contextual analysis of a concept through its usages, only Koselleck develops a programmatic methodology of diachronic analysis, a method for analysing semantic change across time. Koselleck's method suggests that broadly epochal definitions are possible, and he draws those definitions largely from readings of historical dictionaries and encyclopaedias. Skinner, on the other hand, somewhat polemically eschews definition in order to draw out the contextual elements of a word's use by an agent (especially figures such as Machiavelli, whom he calls "innovating ideologists"), distinguishing between criteria for use, circumstances of applicability, and the range of speech acts a word can perform in argument at a given time. How compatible is Skinner's methodology for analysing speech acts with Koselleck's theories of conceptual historicity and semantic shift?

Various scholars have raised this question of compatibility, including Skinner himself.²⁰ In raising the question, this essay delves into the engine room of David Scott's "problem-space"²¹, an increasingly influential concept in both anthropology and the intellectual history of the Arab region.²² As such, alongside Koselleck and Skinner, I also draw from RG Collingwood, another of Scott's sources for the concept of a "problem-space". In the essay, I tentatively resort to one particular aspect of Collingwood's "logic of question and answer", which is his method of "arguing back from the solution to the problem".²³ In other words, if dignity was the answer to a particular political-historical question, then what was the question? What question does the revolutionaries' use of dignity

19- KOSELLECK Reinhart, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*. New York, Columbia University Press, 2004, p. 4.

20- For Skinner's statement on the compatibility between his method and Koselleck's, Cf, SKINNER Quentin, *Visions of Politics: Regarding Method (Volume 1)*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 177-178; And for Melvin Richter's assessment: RICHTER Melvin, *The History of Political and Social Concepts: A Critical Introduction*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 138-142.

21- SCOTT David, *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality*. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1999, p. 8.

22- Cf. BARDAWIL Fadi A., *Revolution and Disenchantment: Arab Marxism and the Bonds of Emancipation*. Durham, Duke University Press Books, 2020; WEISS Max, HANSSEN Jens, "Introduction: Arabic Intellectual History between the Postwar and the Postcolonial," In HANSSEN Jens, WEISS Max (eds.), *Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Present*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, p. 1-35.

23- COLLINGWOOD R.G., *An Autobiography*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1939, p. 70.

respond to? And how did the Assad regime use dignity to respond to a different question?

In the process, neat temporal distinctions between the diachronic and synchronic blur. To that end, the essay borrows distinctions made by David Scott in another essay on cross-generational exchange by intellectuals in the interview setting²⁴, which I apply here to the very different setting of popular usages of words by antagonists locked in a deadly struggle. Diachronically, the essay will distinguish between what Scott calls the co-temporary and the contemporary. This essay will argue that usages can be ‘co-temporary’, in that they both circulate today and thus “share the same time”; but that doesn’t necessarily mean they share the same historicity or political genealogy – they might not be ‘contemporary’ in the sense of coeval. In the case of dignity, despite both uses of dignity circulating at the same time, the genealogy of one usage-definition can be traced to the era of the Arab Spring, while the genealogy of the other belongs to the era of anticolonial struggles for independence. This is not to say that they are entirely independent – they can still refer to and exploit shared affinities, imaginaries, and ideas of state and nation.²⁵

As such, and *pace* Skinner, I argue with Collingwood that it’s possible when thinking through a concept to consider *both* definition *and* usage; I do so without relinquishing Skinner’s insight that a historically grounded and contextual definition is not the same as an atemporal “essential meaning”. Conversely, this also means “there are two ways in which [the answer] is liable to go wrong”.²⁶ By reinserting a word’s usage into the heart of a historical process, I hope to provide the means to account for both continuity in use of the word dignity, and the semantic shifts the concept undergoes, without losing sight of the term’s usage-definition at particular moments in a larger political, social, technological, and intellectual struggle. To that end, I suggest that it’s also necessary to think about how both definitions and usages of the same concept can shift; how different definitions have different historicities; and how usages can follow different criteria, even when being used at the same time by different actors for different political purposes. As a result, I also draw on Stuart Hall’s Gramscian thinking on the question of articulation, the argument that “ideologies are not transformed or changed by replacing one whole, already formed, conception of the world with another, as much as by ‘renovating and making critical an already existing activity’”.²⁷

Overall, there are two questions I hope to answer. First, the essay addresses the problematic of two conflicting usages of dignity circulating at the same time, used to justify antagonistic political formations. Although this raises interesting

24- SCOTT David, « The Temporality of Generations: Dialogue, Tradition, Criticism », *New Literary History*, 2014, vol. 45, no. 2, 2014, p. 157–181.

25- I’m grateful to the first anonymous peer reviewer for helping me formulate this point.

26- COLLINGWOOD R.G., *The Principles of Art*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1958, p. 2-3.

27- HALL Stuart, “Gramsci’s Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity”, *Journal of Communication Inquiry* [online], 1986, vol. 10, no. 2, [Accessed November 2024], p. 23. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/019685998601000202>.

theoretical questions that are certainly worth exploring, the issue isn't as politically perplexing as I might have made it out to be. We're used to hearing competing uses and definitions of key terms and slogans by antagonists in our political debates, whether concepts like freedom and equality, or slogans like "take back control". While it's fairly common for philosophers to attempt to resolve, clarify, or synthesise conflicting usages or even definitions of the same term, it's much less common to explain why conflicting uses or definitions can felicitously circulate at the same time without any need for synthesis in political rhetoric or discourse. The second aim is an intervention in debates about what the Syrian revolution was *for*. It thus suggests an answer to the question of why dignity, and not some other term (such as democracy, human rights, bread, communism, God, etc.) was "renovated" to become a central demand of the Syrian revolution. This in turn might help address, or perhaps bypass, the recurring question of why, or even whether, the Syrian revolution "failed" (as opposed to the less controversial question of why or how it was "defeated"). As with the present-focus in Raymond Williams's *Keywords*, "variations ... are not just faults in a system, or errors of feedback, or deficiencies of education. They are in many cases ... historical and contemporary substance".²⁸ In addition, dignity can be considered a keyword in "two connected senses: they are significant, binding words in certain activities and their interpretation; they are significant, indicative words in certain forms of thought"²⁹. I want to draw out one final aspect of a keyword, which is the attempt to listen to what key a word is spoken in. Like a musical key, the way a word is spoken can be modulated. As contexts change, as political horizons burst open unexpectedly or are slammed shut by force, a word can move up or down the register, from a major to a minor key.

In Dignity

Assad's version of dignity is "born of humiliation", but it's a national humiliation that can only be addressed by demands for national sovereignty in the face of durable, ongoing colonialisms and imperialisms. In Bashar al-Assad's speeches, it's easy to find continuity between his uses of dignity, his father's, and those of Gamal Abdel-Nasser, who for two years was also president of the United Arab Republic,³⁰ briefly fulfilling a longstanding ambition of Arab Nationalism and

28- WILLIAMS Raymond, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. London, Fourth Estate Ltd., 1988, p. 24.

29- *Ibid.*, p. 15. Cf. AL-GHAZZI Omar, « Keywords in Contemporary Syrian Media, Culture and Politics: Introduction », *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* [online], 2022, vol. 15, no. 4, p. 341–345, [Accessed November 2024]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1163/18739865-01504015>. For an adoption of Raymond Williams's methodology in *Keywords* to analyse the last decade of Syria's revolution and war, and in particular his distinction between the "residual" and "emergent" usage of political rhetoric. For Skinner's critique of Raymond Williams's method, see Chapter 9 "The Idea of a Cultural Lexicon" (SKINNER Quentin, *Visions of Politics: Regarding Method (Volume 1)*. Op. cit., p. 158–174).

30- The United Arab Republic (UAR) was the brief union between Egypt and Syria under the presidency of Gamal Abdel-Nasser that lasted from 1958-1961. Egypt continued to be known as the UAR until 1971.

regional anticolonial struggle by redrawing the colonial borders to join Egypt and Syria in political union.

Each year, Bashar al-Assad makes an address on 1 August to mark Armed Forces Day, a public holiday, a practice that continued throughout the Syrian revolution and war. He begins the annual speech by saluting “the men of dignity, sovereignty, and honour (*yā rijāl al-karāma wal-siyāda wal-sharf*)”. In 2019, when I first drafted this essay, he praised the army’s role defending “land and honour (*al-’arḍ wal-’irḍ*)”, and “inscribing the most wonderful image of heroism and sacrifice in your war on terror and in your response to [foreign] aggression” (*Al-Baath Newspaper* 2019, author’s translation).

There are countless other examples of Assad’s use of the word dignity. Take the following speech given at the Damascus Opera House in 2013:

“As for the West, scion of colonialism and master of ratifying the politics of partition and abhorrent sectarian strife, they’re the ones who slammed shut the gates of dialogue, not us. Because they’re used to giving orders to sycophants, while we’re used to sovereignty, independence and the freedom of determination; because they’re addicted to servile hirelings and quislings, while we’re raised on dignity (*karāmah*) and pride (*’ibā’*). And so shall we remain.”³¹

There’s a striking continuity with speeches by Gamal Abdel-Nasser, which are also peppered with the notion of dignity, such as his announcement to the Egyptian National Assembly of the union of Syria and Egypt as the United Arab Republic in 1958, which was also broadcast by radio across Syria:

“This generation of Egyptians is one of those generations facing the promise of a great transition that resembles the carnival of sunrise. We’ve lived the hour of daybreak, and witnessed the victory of light rising up against the darkness of a long night; we’ve lived the dawn of independence, the dawn of freedom, the dawn of pride (*’izza*) and dignity (*karāmah*), we’ve lived the dawn of hope built on a happy society. And today, oh citizens and members of parliament, we’re living a new and magnificent dawn, the dawn of the united Arab East (*mashriq*).”³²

This particular speech comes at a moment when the postcolonial borders of Syria were redrawn, fulfilling (albeit briefly) a long-term anticolonial ambition of the Pan-Arab movement. The radio broadcast has featured prominently in Syrian popular culture, used, for example, as a voiceover in the opening scene of *Aḥlām al-Madīnah*³³, produced by the state-run Syrian National Film Organisation, which deals with the run up to the brief period of union between Egypt and Syria.

31- Accessed March 2022. Available at: <https://www.voltairenet.org/article177109.html>.

32- *Mashriq* here is a play on words, which means the Arab East, while *mushriq* means shining or radiant, and is an adjective that usually qualifies the rising sun. The French term “Levant” perhaps captures the play on words better. <http://nasser.bibalex.org/TextViewer.aspx?TextID=SPCH-578-en>
<http://nasser.bibalex.org/MediaViewer.aspx?VideoID=SPCH-AUD-23238-en>

33- MALAS Mohamed, *Aḥlām al-madīnah*. Trans. Dreams of the City, National Film Organisation, 1984.

Dignity has been used so frequently in speeches by Bashar al-Assad, Hafez al-Assad, and Gamal Abdel-Nasser that I could have chosen any number of examples.³⁴ Despite certain important developments – in particular the introduction of “terrorism” as a threat at least equal to that of imperialism and foreign aggression which the dignity of national sovereignty can also counteract – the term persists within a political lexicon that varies relatively little. Dignity continues to be used to demand and uphold national sovereignty, whether threatened by imperialism or terrorism. In short, this usage of the term bears a temporal watermark that indexes a postcolonial era of national sovereignty and the ongoing anticolonial struggle that underpins it.

By 2010, dignity had also become ubiquitous amongst opponents of the same regimes that took power through and in the wake of anticolonial struggle. Not only was it used extensively in popular chants and complaints against these regimes’ treatment, it frequently popped up in NGO statements, grey literature, and in descriptions by activists of why they joined the revolution in the first place. During fieldwork, the activists I interviewed frequently used the word dignity to describe why they had committed themselves to a struggle against the Assad regime, as well as to evaluate the successes or failures of that struggle, for which they had all paid a heavy price. During participant observation at an opposition media organisation, or during an interview with an activist, if my interlocutor brought up the term, I would note down its usage, and frequently ask them what they meant by it. Of the over 75 activists I interviewed over an 18-month period, none discussed dignity primarily in terms of national sovereignty, or independence from the influence of imperial powers. Despite their keenness to demonstrate its hypocrisy, they indicated that the regime’s usage of the term was necessary yet insufficient. They shared with the regime’s uses the structural contrast between dignity and humiliation (*dhull*), although the meaning of humiliation also underwent a parallel shift.

Hanan, whom I first met while she was living in exile in Gaziantep, Turkey, was an activist who had been a member of the Local Coordination Committee in Ghouta, and who worked at the time for the international foundation for electoral systems. She perhaps best summed up this sense of a semantic shift and its relationship to the durability of anti-imperial struggle in the present.³⁵ She was once forced at school, she told me, to translate a speech about the dignity of the Palestinians made by the then-Syrian Foreign Minister, Farouk al-Sharaa, during a 1999 visit by Madeleine Albright to promote a peace deal that ultimately failed. Recalling the event in 2018, it struck her as “totally hypocritical, when the regime doesn’t even treat its own people with dignity”. When I asked her to explain why she used the word dignity when the regime also frequently employed the term, she replied

34- For a thorough analysis of the relationships between dignity and Arab Nationalism in the Syrian context, including comparisons with Gamal Abdel-Nasser’s Egypt. Harkin analyses the same Abdel-Nasser speech on p. 194. Cf. HARKIN Juliette, *Ideological Contest in Syria’s Revolutionary Moment: The Concept of Dignity*. Ph.D. thesis, University of East Anglia, 2017. Available at: <http://search.proquest.com/docview/2001150479?pq-origsite=summon>.

35- Conversation with Hanan Halimeh, Gaziantep, Turkey, 11 October 2018.

with a varied list of experiences and expectations: “Dignity means no one has the right to oppress anyone else,” in reference to both the regime’s treatment of Syrians and the Israeli treatment of Palestinians. But then she continued, “It also means you can’t claim,” as some Islamist battalions were doing at the time of our conversation, “that someone is a *mulhid* [a heretic or apostate]. It means to live a dignified life of your choosing,” then tacking back to the state, “not have it dictated to you by the state, so I can go to the shopping mall wearing my head covered if I want to, and not be turned away by the security guard.” Dignity, she was arguing, summed up the difference between the aspirations for life after the revolution, and life under either the Assad regime or under Islamist militias. It wasn’t only that dignity was being “renovated”, to borrow Stuart Hall’s term, for the sake of her struggle; the regime’s use of dignity had also been hollowed out by its treatment of Syrians.

By the time I interviewed her in 2018, Hanan was pessimistic that her dream of “living in dignity” in Syria would be realised any time soon. Dignity was being discussed in a minor key. “But slowly people are changing,” she told me. She went to a meeting in Geneva as part of a UN-sponsored Track Two Dialogue initiative, bringing together non-official revolutionaries and non-official loyalists. “When a secularist regime businessman saw me, a woman who wears a headscarf [*muḥajjaba*] from Ghouta [a working-class suburb of Damascus], speaking foreign languages, using a brand new laptop, and he’s spent the last seven years stuck in Damascus, working on the same old computers, I can see that he felt left behind, while we’ve progressed (*taqadamnā*). We can accept others; they can’t.”

In her anecdote, she highlighted the paradox that despite being the one to have lived years of military siege in Ghouta, it was the regime and its supporters who were cut off from the world. Despite the consequences of defeat and displacement did she have any regrets? “No!” Could she imagine ever going back to Damascus? “No!” What if Bashar goes? “And his security services!” What if they both go? “Then I’d go back; it would be my duty to go back. But first, I want to live in dignity (*baddī ‘ish bi-karāmtī*). That’s the first goal.”³⁶ As Hanan made clear, dignity was the criterion for her action, her way of describing and evaluating political virtue, and how she distinguished the revolution from both the secularist regime and the Islamist militias. Defeat and displacement were “cunning” in a Hegelian sense, resulting in her personal intellectual and political progress, and in her own sense of dignity. The revolution, she suggested, had led to defeat rather than failure, and even in defeat self-realisation was possible. One of the striking things about Hanan’s use of dignity was that while it involved a shift, it didn’t entail full semantic rupture. Hanan was, in Skinner’s words, “marching backwards into battle” in her use of the term dignity. Demanding dignity, she shows, is a speech act whose illocutionary force – Hanan’s intention in demanding to live in dignity – is to reject as insufficient, but still necessary,

36- Conversation with Hanan, Gaziantep, Turkey, 11 October 2018.

previous conceptions of dignity.³⁷ National sovereignty and a political posture towards Israel are necessary, but they're not sufficient to live in dignity. She uses dignity to insist on the good treatment of Syrians by the Assad regime, just as one must insist on the good treatment of Palestinians. This is echoed by intellectuals and more popular condemnations of the Assad regime that draw from the lexicon of the anticolonial struggle against Israel to evaluate the postcolonial state formation – for example, by calling the Assad regime an occupation, or by blunt comparisons of Assad's treatment of Syrians as worse than Israeli treatment of Palestinians.³⁸ The usage, in short, reveals the unravelling of at least two of the three consensual beliefs (Israel and the Golan) enumerated two decades ago by Lisa Wedeen.³⁹

The usage reveals both that Hanan is attempting, to paraphrase Skinner, to tailor the available normative language in order to fit her political project; while also showing how normative language can set conditions on her project when used to legitimate it⁴⁰. Or as Koselleck might add, Hanan's choice of concept acts as both a horizon and a limit for her political project. The result is a *partial* re-articulation of the term dignity from the normative language of anti-imperial struggle and national independence. Once this conceptual loosening happens, the concept is renovated (Hall 1986), opening the floodgates for complaints about treatment at the hands of the state and its institutions in terms of dignity, comparisons between the treatment of Syrians by the Assad regime and the treatment of Palestinians by Israel, and cascading into demands for a revolutionary struggle to re-found the state on the basis of dignity.

37- Cf. SKINNER Quentin, *Visions of Politics: Regarding Method (Volume 1)*, op. cit., chapter 6; for a full discussion of interpreting historical texts as speech acts, and the differences between intention and motive, as well as the differences between the illocutionary and perlocutionary force of an utterance. Cf. AUSTIN, John Langshaw. *How to do things with words*. Harvard university press, 1975, p. 109–120; and RICHTER Melvin, *The History of Political and Social Concepts: A Critical Introduction*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 131.

38- Two examples are Yassin al-Haj Saleh (AL-HAJ SALEH Yassin, *The Impossible Revolution: Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy*. London, Hurst & Company, 2017, p. 294), and Samar Yazbek's description of the regime as an occupation in a recent film by Rania Stephan (2022).

39- WEDEEN Lisa, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*. Op. cit., p.7; Cf. IBRAHEEM Aamer, ZAKAR Adrien, "Jawlān," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* [online], 2022, vol. 15, no. 4, [Accessed November 2024], p. 358–366. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1163/18739865-01504005> For an account of this unravelling and factionalism from within the Golan Heights.

40- SKINNER Quentin, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought: Volume 2, The Age of Reformation*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1978; RICHTER Melvin, *The History of Political and Social Concepts: A Critical Introduction*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 132.

A range of political experiences indexed opposition uses of dignity.⁴¹ But like Hanan's, these experiences shared a certain structure of humiliating treatment by the postcolonial state: from Muhammad N., who was beaten up in a branch of the security services after being overheard saying, "Fuck that guy and this whole thing" about someone from Hezbollah who'd come to give a speech at his university in Aleppo; to Fadi, one of the founders of the NGO Local Development & Small-Projects Support (LDSPS), an outgrowth of the Local Coordination Committees, who realised when he first migrated to France in the 2000s that at passport control, unlike in Syria, the queue for local citizens moves more quickly than the queue for foreigners, and that the French aren't scared of their own border guards; or Heaven, a Kurdish writer and activist who survived the siege in Yarmouk, who said dignity meant "no more fear; it's horrible when you have to *tiksar 'aynak* [hang your head, be browbeaten, broken spirited] and obey"; or Muhammad D., who said, "No one can rip me off, no more corruption ... Dignity means I can start work, I can sell corn if I want to on the street without bribing someone for a security permit (*tafyish*)"; or the young activist Samer B., who said, "Dignity means: treat me like a human, just that (*w bas*)"; or finally Muhammad H., who said, "It's that intangible thing (*mā ilū mass*). Something related to one's self or soul (*dhatu aw nafsu*). After a certain amount of mistreatment, it means saying enough. Even if one million die today, we won't let one million die over 50 years. The regime treated people like sheep for the slaughter (*mitil qatī' ghanam*). It's the core – the thing you won't even let anyone see. It's not a word, it's a principle. Wars happen because of dignity. It's the opposite of humiliation."⁴²

For Dignity

The aims of the Syrian revolution – what the revolution was for – as with the Arab revolutions more broadly, have tended to be subsumed under the categories and discourses of human rights, democracy, and neoliberalism⁴³. Within these

41- As well as technological experiences. In 2013, the notion of dignity would also emerge at the centre of a debate between Syrian opposition intellectuals on the circulation of atrocity images, "the right to a dignified image". In one camp, filmmaker Ossama Mohammed (MOHAMMED, Ossama et BEDIRXAN, Wiam Simav. *Silvered Water: Syria Self-Portrait*. 2014) and the dissident intellectual Yassin al-Haj Saleh (AL-HAJ SALEH Yassin, "Taḥdiq fi wajh al-faḥzī" [Staring in the Face of Atrocity]," *Al-Jumhuriya* [online], May 2015, [Accessed November 2024]. Available at: <https://www.aljumhuriya.net/ar/33487>), would argue that the free circulation of atrocity images allows Syrians to contemplate the true nature of the regime's brutality; and in the other camp, Abounaddara (ABOUNADDARA, op. cit.) and Mohammad Ali Atassi (ATASSI Mohammad Ali, "Al-Karāma Fi Ḥuḍūr al-Faḥzā'a (Dignity in the Presence of Atrocity)," *Al-Jumhuriya* [online], July 2015, [Accessed November 2024]. Available at: <https://www.aljumhuriya.net/ar/33499>.) called for the restriction through elaborating a concept of "dignity". I give a fuller account of this debate in Chapter 4 of my doctoral thesis: TARNOWSKI Stefan, « Struggling with Images: Revolution, War, and Media in Syria », Columbia University, 2022, p. 145-169.)

42- Interview with: Siraj M., Gaziantep, Turkey, 19 April 2019; Muhammad N., Gaziantep, Turkey, 12 October 2018; Fadi D., Istanbul, Turkey, 15 October 2018; Heaven J., Istanbul, Turkey, 1 November 2018; Muhammad D., Istanbul, Turkey, 7 November 2018; Samer B., Istanbul, Turkey, 23 November 2018; Muhammad H., Istanbul, Turkey, 4 December 2018.

43- BAYAT Asef, *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2017, GOPAL Anand, "The Arab Thermidor," *Catalyst* [online], 2020, vol. 4, no. 2, [Accessed November 2024]. Available at: <https://catalyst-journal.com/vol4/no2/the-arab-thermidor>.

analyses, dignity is positioned as a concept drawn from a hegemonic, global, neoliberal, human rights discourse. However, in the final section of this essay, I argue that not all of these political experiences or statements about dignity can be easily subsumed under those categories and discourses. To do so would be to lose some of what Raymond Williams called a word's historical and contextual substance, as well as the key in which a word is uttered.

The uses outlined above resonate with an interesting point made by Koselleck on the distinction between words and concepts: "In use a word can become unambiguous. By contrast, a concept must remain ambiguous in order to be a concept".⁴⁴ Each of these usages of dignity is fairly unambiguous, indexing a particular moment, experience, or example of mistreatment. But none of these particular accounts of dignity exhaust its conceptual meaning. That's not to say dignity can mean anything, or that its meaning is infinitely "deferred". The word still has what Koselleck called a particular "temporal horizon" and "space of experience", which involves a protest against humiliating mistreatment, a demand for the re-foundation of the state – as well as the tacit and strategic refusal to jettison the anticolonial demand for national sovereignty, and an opposition to ongoing imperialisms and colonialisms such as Zionism or the US invasions of Iraq.⁴⁵

In the regime and opposition usages of dignity, there are parallels with the changing meanings of human rights over the course of the twentieth century described by Partha Chatterjee.⁴⁶ According to Chatterjee, the earlier meaning of human rights emerged under the aegis of "a new space of internationalism" created by the non-aligned movement in contradistinction to the polarised world of the Cold War. In 1955 at Bandung, "no one had any doubt about the principal problem of human rights in the world: it was the continued existence of colonialism and racial discrimination", and the only way to establish human rights was "the principle of self-determination of peoples and nations"⁴⁷. In that sense, and resonating with Assad's and Nasser's uses of dignity, human rights were a "collective right to autonomy of each nation founded on popular sovereignty."⁴⁸ But human rights would later be "conditioned by three historical developments in the 1980s" as part of what Chatterjee calls "a new discourse of cosmopolitanism."⁴⁹ These three conditions were, "First, many postcolonial regimes in Asia and Africa became autocratic, authoritarian, corrupt, and violent, leading to serious failures in looking after and protecting their citizens."⁵⁰ The second condition was the expansion of global trade and finance, and the third was the collapse of the

44- KOSELLECK Reinhart, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*. New York, Columbia University Press, 2004, p. 85.

45- I'm grateful to the second anonymous reviewer for helping me develop this point.

46- CHATTERJEE Partha, « Nationalism, Internationalism, and Cosmopolitanism: Some Observations from Modern Indian History », *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 2016, vol. 36, no. 2, p. 320–334.

47- *Ibid.*, p. 329.

48- *Ibid.*

49- CHATTERJEE Partha, *op. cit.*, p. 330.

50

Ibid.

Soviet Union. Within this “discursive space”, Chatterjee shows how “the question of rights on a global plane began to shift back to the classical liberal concern for the protection of individual rights to freedom and equality.”⁵¹ In addition, a new discourse of human rights emerged in the 1980s “as the justification for intervention in the sovereign domain of non-Western governments by a global civic community acting on behalf of humanity itself.”⁵²

The second half of this story is particularly well known, and is frequently invoked in various critical theories of the present. It’s also the lens through which the Syrian revolution has generally been viewed: a revolution undermined by activist attachments to a global discourse of human rights, humanitarianism, as well as the encroachments of neoliberalism (for example, Bayat; Gopal).⁵³ I want instead to think along different methodological and theoretical lines, as the lens of a global discourse can serve to occlude the more nuanced ways that words are used, how concepts emerge and take shape, as well as their space of experience, horizons of expectation, and target of critique.⁵⁴

Rather than reading the demand for dignity as an instance of a discursive shift conditioned by global historical forces, I want to think along the lines of Fadi Bardawil’s “critical theory in a minor key”⁵⁵. To that end, the rest of the essay doesn’t claim to have the “last word on the state of the world,” but instead proposes that the demand for dignity be seen “as an energetic performance and a strategic intervention in a problem-space.”⁵⁶ Within this “problem-space”, the opposition demand for dignity can be seen as the answer to a problem of treatment by Syria’s postcolonial regime. The aim of the final part of this essay is to “argue back from the solution to the problem”⁵⁷, and thus to try to sketch out what that particular problem of treatment was, and by outlining it, to clarify why it was dignity that emerged as a central demand of the Syrian revolution alongside freedom and justice – and not, for example, other demands such as democracy, human rights, communism, or bread.⁵⁸

As Fadi Bardawil has argued, “The mass political movements across the Arab world that called for their dignity against the decades of humiliation by postcolonial regimes displaced the West from the center of Arab mass emancipatory political practice.”⁵⁹ Bardawil raises a series of urgent political questions regarding the

51- *Ibid.*

52- *Ibid.*

53- BAYAT Asef, *op. cit.*; GOPAL Anand, “The Arab Thermidor”. *Op. cit.*

54- KOSELLECK Reinhart, *op. cit.*, p. 79-81.

55- BARDAWIL Fadi A., « Critical Theory in a Minor Key to Take Stock of the Syrian Revolution », In FASSIN Didier, HARCOURT Bernard E. (eds.), *A Time for Critique*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2019, p. 174–192.

56- *Ibid.*, p. 177.

57- COLLINGWOOD R.G., *An Autobiography*. *Op. cit.*, p. 70.

58- There’s another article that can be written about the relationship between dignity and the two other central demands of the revolution, freedom and justice, and especially with the concept of social justice in the regional and Islamic history of political thought. I’m grateful to the anonymous peer reviewer for pointing this out.

59- BARDAWIL Fadi A., « Critical Theory in a Minor Key to Take Stock of the Syrian Revolution », *op. cit.*, p. 181.

theoretical apprehensions of the Arab Spring, in particular by what he calls “anti-imperialist transcendentalism”⁶⁰. The danger, he suggests, is that critical theory operating at the scale of global discourses “can be complicit in erasing emancipatory struggles”⁶¹. Instead, he calls for an awareness of “how concepts ought to be translated, displaced, and stretched to articulate a critical theory attuned to the emergence of newness in the world.”⁶²

Following what Kiwan, Wedeen, and others have argued, national sovereignty, anti-imperialism, and anti-Zionism are the main causes that have historically reconciled Syrians with the Assad regime, its rhetoric, and its politics. These beliefs were described as bestowing dignity on Syria in the regime’s rhetoric. The other consensual aspect of Syria’s postcolonial rhetoric and politics is what often gets termed “bread”, a shorthand for the provision of an economic “safety net” in exchange for relinquishing political freedoms.⁶³ Hafez al-Assad once characterised the trade-off starkly in an anecdote related by the historian Hanna Batatu, which he used to explain the centrality of the regime’s economic policy for winning popular support:

“The people have ‘primarily economic demands,’ that they aspire to acquire such things as a plot of land, a house, a car, or the like, and that these demands he can satisfy ‘in one way or another.’ Only ‘one or two hundred individuals at most,’ [Hafez al-Assad] added, seriously engage in or make politics their profession and will oppose him no matter what he does. ‘It is for them,’ he concluded, ‘that the Mezzeh prison [a notorious prison for political prisoners in Damascus] was originally intended’.”⁶⁴

Following Batatu, the sociologist and investigative journalist Anand Gopal argued that the trade-off of political freedoms for an economic safety net made up what he terms the region-wide, postcolonial “Arab social contract”. Despite this trade-off, however, Syria wasn’t entirely controlled, or unfree, politically. Instead, alternative forms of representation and political leverage were made possible through systems of state-regulated unions, a system that he terms “corporatism”. The basis of the trade-off was that

“Despite these [economic] benefits the masses enjoyed almost no political rights; this provision of a safety net in exchange for surrendering political freedom is the great social contract that underpinned Arab regimes: torture

60- *Ibid.*, p. 176.

61- *Ibid.*, p. 177.

62- *Ibid.*

63- Anand Gopal uses the word “butter” instead, which is perhaps the wrong choice of term since butter isn’t widely eaten in the region, and “bread” was in fact a central demand of the Egyptian Revolution (*‘aysh, hurriya, ‘adālah ijtīmā‘īya*) (GOPAL Anand, “The Arab Thermidor,” *Catalyst* [online], 2020, vol. 4, no. 2, [Accessed November 2024]. Available at: <https://catalyst-journal.com/vol4/no2/the-arab-thermidor>).

64- BATATU Hanna, *Syria’s Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics*. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1999, p. 205-206.

chambers and butter. There were no elections, no free press, no opposition parties, no independent judiciary, no independent unions, and no right to strike. By shielding the poorest citizens from the violence of the market, the dictatorships exposed their populations to the naked violence of the political order.”⁶⁵

Gopal goes on to describe a series of “neoliberal restructurings”, which both exposed Syrians to the violence of the market, and “disincorporated” them from the limited form of representation and power they possessed through various Baathist corporatist structures and unions. The unwinding of corporatist institutions, in turn, also abolished the structural means of exerting pressure on unpopular regimes. The result, Gopal argues, is that by 2011, Syrians had no means by which to engage in revolutionary class politics, and had instead to resort to violence organised around kinship and neighbourhood, articulating their demands first through what he calls liberal ideas – namely human rights – and then through populist forms of Islamism.

Gopal describes the neoliberal turn as something of a *pharmakon* for the Arab revolutions, both creating the economic conditions for the revolution and acting as the cause of its demise:⁶⁶ “The deeper tragedy of the Arab Spring was not simply that the revolutionaries failed, but that the seeds of their defeat were sown long before the first protest banner was unfurled, the first square occupied.” But all hope is not lost, and the current dispensation is not insurmountable: “it is possible to imagine a victorious uprising, because there was one: Tunisia. This revolution produced the only democratic transition among the 2011 Arab Spring countries; Tunisia successfully transformed from a neoliberal autocracy to a neoliberal democracy.”

The analysis is elegant. But was the Syrian revolution a failed revolution for democracy? Was it a revolution for democracy at all? And if the Syrian revolution was the result of structural changes arising from the unwinding of the postcolonial social contract, then why did Syrians explicitly insist that they weren’t struggling for bread, nor because of economic grievances, but rather for dignity? In a famous episode, for example, when the spokesperson for Bashar al-Assad reacted to the early protests in Deraa, southern Syria, with a commitment to alleviate poverty in rural areas, the protesters famously responded with the chant *Ya Būthaina, ya Sha‘bān, al-sha‘b al-sūrī mū jū‘ān* (Oh Bouthaina Shaaban, the Syrian people aren’t hungry!)⁶⁷ The episode was repeated anecdotally to me during fieldwork. But the same argument has been made on the basis of quantitative data, with political scientists such as Lisa Wedeen, Sonia Fenner, and Kevin Mazur suggesting that “economic measures are extremely weak predictors of mobilization during the

65- GOPAL Anand, “The Island of Democracy,” *op. cit.*

66- The term *pharmakon*, popular in media studies, comes from Derrida’s reading of Plato’s dialogue on the effect of the technology of writing on memory (DERRIDA Jacques, “Plato’s Pharmacy,” In KAMUF Peggy (ed.), *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1991, p. 112 140.)

67- My translation fails to capture the fact that Shaaban sounds like the word for feeling full or sated *shab‘ān*.

first eleven months of the Syrian uprising.”⁶⁸

What this suggests isn’t necessarily that the demand for dignity is incompatible with economic grievances, but rather that dignity cannot be reduced to a demand for economic rights. Or, to return to Collingwood’s terms, dignity wasn’t an answer to a primarily economic question. In fact, having for so long lived under a “social contract” in which political rights had been relinquished for economic security, as Gopal elegantly argues, Syrians have been starkly aware of the arbitrariness involved in exchanging one for the other. What had been given with one hand had more recently been taken away with the other, such that Syrians had ended up with neither. The reality of this trade-off begs another question: how could Syrians possibly make economic grievances, at the expense of political rights, the central demand of a revolution?⁶⁹

So, was the Syrian revolution merely a “liberal” revolution for democracy? Or one that spoke the global discourse of human rights? If it was, then it’s necessary to explain why democracy and human rights weren’t central demands. Since these discourses are by many scholarly accounts hegemonic, then why not use them to formulate one’s revolutionary demands? I’ve suggested above that to argue along these lines is to neglect the widespread credibility of the regime’s anticolonial rhetoric – the consensual beliefs mentioned by Wedeen or the “administration” of “people’s feelings” mentioned by Assad – as well as the power that opponents could wield by calling out its hypocrisies. But there’s another set of reasons democracy, human rights and other liberal terms couldn’t act as unifying demands.

During fieldwork, especially in interviews with media activists and members of civil society organisations, democracy often did come up as a central aim. It often seemed that the more professional the activist, the more common it was to use these discourses as idioms for expressing grievances and articulating demands for international support, and sometimes for military intervention. But for the most part, following the 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq and the larger context of the War on Terror – which had also led to a mass displacement of Iraqis to Syria – the discourse of democracy had been largely discredited. That’s not to say that democracy didn’t become an important aspiration for some. Nor is it to deny that at times experiments in democratic practice were central

68- WEDEEN Lisa, *Authoritarian Apprehensions: Ideology, Judgment, and Mourning in Syria*. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2019. Cf. MAZUR Kevin, op. cit.

Philip Proudfoot makes an alternative argument, namely that while the revolt was driven by economic concerns, it didn’t give rise to explicitly formulated economic demands because of the exhaustion of the regime’s own socialist rhetoric. I’m grateful to the second anonymous reviewer for suggesting I include this line of argument (PROUDFOOT Philip, « The Smell of Blood: Accumulation by Dispossession, Resistance and the Language of Populist Uprising in Syria », *City*, 2017, vol. 21, no. 3–4, p. 483–502).

69- This wouldn’t, of course, convince Joseph Daher and Gilbert Achcar, who argue that economic conditions were nonetheless determining these uprisings (ACHCAR Gilbert, *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 2013.; DAHER Joseph, *Syria after the Uprisings: The Political Economy of State Resilience*. London, Pluto Press, 2019.).

to revolutionary organising in many liberated areas of Syria⁷⁰. But the War on Terror, a series of invasions and occupations ostensibly for democracy, had made it impossible for democracy to act as a unifying, revolutionary demand. As in other countries across the region, democracy had become a slogan associated with Western military intervention, brandished as the cynical justification for an imperial project. It was frequently dismissed as such in regime, Islamist, and popular discourse.⁷¹

A social and political movement for democracy in Syria had taken place not so long ago. But it did so after the death of Hafez al-Assad, and before Iraq and the War on Terror. In 2000, a series of local discussion forums flowered, a movement rooted in the language of political and human rights, which was inspired by the fall of the Communist Bloc, which frequently called for a transition to democracy and the strengthening of civil society, and which came to be called the Damascus Spring. Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab has argued that the Damascus Spring was a precursor to the 2011 Syrian revolution. Although she's at pains to highlight that she's "not arguing that the writings and ideas led to the movements in some causal way", she does nonetheless maintain that there was continuity, which she calls a "similarity of concerns, yearnings, and endeavors expressed" by the Syrian intellectuals debating democracy and human rights in 2000 and the Syrian protestors in 2011.⁷² Whether or not that's the case, her account also avoids grappling with the question of why the demands in 2011 had shifted away from democracy.

The astuteness of demanding dignity given the ideological, historical, and political context of Syria and the wider region is precisely the way it manages to navigate between the Scylla and Charybdis of economic and political rights, and between the human rights discourse of the present and the anticolonial discourse of the past. Both liberal and Marxist theories often begin with the dilemma that one or the other – economic or political rights – must be prioritised, whether formulated as Rawls' "lexical ordering" between freedom and equality or the base-superstructure formulae of Marxist historical materialism.⁷³ Syrians had lived through the harshness of one set of rights being prioritised at the expense

70- GOPAL Anand, "The Island of Democracy," *The New Yorker* [online], December 2018, [Accessed November 2024]. Available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/12/10/syrias-last-bastion-of-freedom>; MUNIF Yasser, *The Syrian Revolution: Between the Politics of Life and the Geopolitics of Death*. London, Pluto Press, 2020; YASSIN-KASSAB Robin, AL-SHAMI Leila, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*. London, Pluto Press, 2016.

71- See, for example, Thomas Pierret's discussion of democracy in Syria among a Reformist 'ulamā'. Particularly interesting is that even those who are in favour of democracy in principle, and see no conflict with Islamic values and principles, argue that in the particular context of Syria it "would be 'exploited by the despotic forces of the West'". (PIERRET Thomas, *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 136)

72- KASSAB Elizabeth Suzanne, *Enlightenment on the Eve of the Revolution: The Egyptian and Syrian Debates*. New York, Columbia University Press, 2019, p. 148.

73- In a similar way, dignity navigates between what scholars have called the "profits and losses" of exchanging political rights for human rights (FASSIN Didier, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 2011, p. 8; Cf. MEISTER Robert, *After Evil: A Politics of Human Rights*. New York, Columbia University Press, 2011.)

of the other. By demanding dignity, however, there was no attempt to replace economic rights with political rights, nor to supersede both with a discourse of human rights. Demanding dignity didn't necessitate making an argument about their conflict and priority.

Demanding dignity could exploit certain affinities within the popular anticolonial and anti-imperial rhetoric of national sovereignty and anti-Zionism. But dignity then extends to include a political demand for the end of alienation from political institutions; the economic demand to live a decent life, meaning the end of corruption and intimidation, to have prospects for a job and to make a decent living beyond enforced economic migration; to end the privileges associated with elites in Syria and the West by raising the treatment of ordinary Syrians to their level; to be able to practise forms of Islamic public devotion in the face of the regime's discriminatory secularism that was often a mask for sectarianism; and even at a global scale, to be able to speak in a language of universality through resonances with notions of human rights regarding the legitimacy of their struggle.

The point of this essay hasn't been to offer a definition of a new "ideal" of dignity. In fact, the essay refuses to clarify or synthesise a unified definition of dignity, and instead tries to hold in unresolved tension the contradictory co-temporary (but not contemporary) usages circulating today. I've therefore attempted to think through certain explanations and critiques that have been made of the Syrian revolution – its demands, defeats, and intellectual debates – when viewed exclusively or primarily through global discourses and their critiques, such as human rights or neoliberalism. My argument is that the Syrian uprising shouldn't be summarised as a failed revolution for democracy, nor reduced to a misguided (or even contemptible) attempt by *de facto* liberals to prioritise political over economic rights, and who were thus outmanoeuvred by populist Islamism or authoritarianism. Instead, only once the conceptual history of the Syrian revolution has been recast in the terms used by its participants can we really begin to address the questions of success and failure, defeat (whether cruel or cunning), and victory. That's not because those terms have a discrete emic meaning linked to a Syrian cosmology, but rather because they might also work against the grain of global discourses, however subtly.

Today, there's a sense that the revolution ended in defeat and incalculable loss. But in order to make sense of the discourse of revolution, it's the uses of dignity and the other demands of the revolution that should be at the centre of critical theories, ethnographies, and histories of Syria's revolution.

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ملخص | يكتسب مفهوم الكرامة بُعداً غريباً عند التفكير في استخدامه المزدوج من قبل النظام ومعارضيه في سوريا منذ عام ٢٠١١. مثل بشار الأسد، يبدو أن الكرامة لها «جسمان». أحدهما مرتبط بفترة الثورات العربية، وهي أحداث اعتقد بعض الباحثين سابقاً أنها ستعلن نهاية مرحلة ما بعد الاستعمار (دباشي حميد)؛ والآخر مرتبط بالنضال المناهض للاستعمار من أجل الكرامة التي تجسدها الدولة ما بعد الاستعمارية (هاركين جولييت). بالاعتماد على كوينتن سكينر وراينهاردت كوزيليك، يقترح المقال منهجاً لتحليل الاستمرارية المعجمية والتحولات الدلالية في معجم الثورة السورية. باستخدام منهج R.G. Collingwood القائم على الرجوع من الحل إلى المشكلة، أقوم بتحليل سبب اختيار الكرامة، وليس مصطلحاً آخر مثل الديمقراطية، كأحد المطالب الأساسية للثورة السورية.

الكلمات المفتاحية | الكرامة، سوريا، الربيع العربي، التاريخ المفاهيمي، الخطابات السياسية، أنثروبولوجيا الثورة.

Stefan Tarnowski is an Early-Career Research Fellow at Corpus Christi College (06-2022), University of Cambridge, and a postdoctoral researcher on 'Views of Violence: Images as Affective, Documentary, and Evidentiary' at the University of Copenhagen (05-2023).