

## A Parasitic Critique for IR

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### Abstract

This paper introduces the concept of a ‘parasitic critique.’ It begins by theorizing the ethico-political positionality of ‘critical’ researchers by speaking with Michel Serres to introduce the figure of the parasitic-researcher. That device explores a tension in critical research between hearing ‘thick’ descriptions of our interlocutors’ lifeworlds before channeling them into ‘thin’ meta-theoretical accounts. The paper argues that this dilemma relates to the rhetorical ‘style’ of critical approaches in IR, which employ a certain ‘suspicious hermeneutics’ that is unwilling to take seriously the voices of particular interlocutors. By contrast, a parasitic critique is laid out as a critical orientating sensibility focused on reordering the methods of critique, with the hope of cultivating a non-judgmental ethic of ‘care-full’ analysis and description. This argument is made by drawing out one ‘lay’ critical theory of political violence that sees critique make a three-fold switch from suspicion to learning, exclusion to combination, and contradiction to composition. Throughout, these claims are nested within self-reflections on my own work interviewing both victims and perpetrators of torture, which demonstrate – often uncomfortably – how it is necessary to find points of critical sympathy between the subjugator and the subjugated that can be leveraged for the ethico-political good.

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“Abuse,” Michel Serres (1982:168) once wrote, “appears before use.” For Serres, human society begins with *abuse-value*: “The relation makes life and kills; someone is maintained by the survival of another. The parasite lives on the host, by him, with him, and in him, *per ipsum et cum ipso et in ipso*; it makes him its house, its tabernacle; it reproduces in him and increases until the point when the host dies.” (Serres-1982:168). All research too – it is a common idea – begins with abuse (Fluehr-Lobban-2002). The abuse of channeling a lifeworld into a text, narrow, distant, and cold. Reproducing only, the cynical might say, a citation count. Serres (1995:195) goes on to say, however, that abuses like these can either “wind up being a habit” or be converted into *use* and a symbiotic process of exchange between parasite and host or researcher and object. The challenge is to make that conversion, from abuse to *use-value*, from parasitically building research *on top of* others to making it work *for* others.

Within International Relations (IR), the response of many to this challenge has been to seek to “trouble the dominant structures of certainty, power, and authority” that make the world an abusive place (Lisle-2017:419; Milliken-1999; Krause and Williams-1996). Though abuse may be innate to research, I and many others hope, employing *critique* can create use from that abuse. But doubts are

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now growing. Increasingly, it is suggested that this critical project has reached an impasse. Not only does the world (political) seem worse now than when critical approaches to IR began (Lisle-2017; Abraham and Abramson-2017), but so too do the concepts central to those efforts to trouble the taken for granted find themselves (fairly or not) implicated in the rise of ‘post-truth’ political trends and the panoply of socio-political abuses those trends have and continue to inaugurate (Calcutt-2016).

In this paper, I dwell on the dilemmas facing critical IR. But I do so not by arguing against the specific content of any particular critical approach. Instead, I argue that many of the failures of critique stem from the *style* of its modes of inquiry and, therein, questions of method. This move to appreciating the stylistic qualities of critique is important because what constitutes critical IR can be divided into innumerable variants – Foucauldian, Frankfurt School, Marxist, etc. Attempting to dissect the shortcomings of any specific intervention cannot, therefore, account for the trouble *collectively* facing the broad school of critical approaches to studying world politics. Alternatively, I thus hope to demonstrate that a majority of critical IR *stylistically* encompasses what Felski (2015) terms a *hermeneutics of suspicion*. This rhetorical ‘style’ founds critique on a desire to hermeneutically ‘unveil’ hidden aspects of the world by being very ‘suspicious’ of everything we might see, hear, or read about.

Focusing on the ‘styles’ of critique thus allows us to “discern commonalities between... [approaches] that are often contrasted or counter-posed” (Felski-2015:2). Indeed, hereafter, I take critical IR as the broad canvas of approaches sharing this hermeneutics of suspicion, whether emancipatory, post-structuralist, or otherwise defined. Nonetheless, my focus is on scholarship within these traditions that seek to ‘do something’ with their knowledge production (e.g. Lisle-2016:4; Enloe-2000:17). This includes those (emancipatory) scholars who have gone as far as to suggest critique has to “attempt to impact upon practice; that remains the ultimate test of the usefulness of the critical approach” (Wyn-Jones-2012:100). However, it also includes, say, those post-structuralist thinkers who are sometimes accused of making the “emancipatory ‘critical’ appendage [to IR] redundant” (Hynek & Chandler-2013:54) but who nonetheless *do* envisage change as emerging from their criticism, albeit a more limited type of change, expressed in terms of resistance, subversion, exposure etc., over emancipation.

With the above in mind, my central concern hereafter is with the ethical dilemmas that emerge when a hermeneutics of suspicion is carried over to normative-political projects to ‘do something.’ When a suspicious hermeneutics lingers at this level, I suggest, it quickly *excludes* and *silences* certain voices and their lived experiences. Two exclusions particularly interest me. First, the silencing of the voices of those who personify subjugation. The difficulty with this silencing is not that it originates in taking a normative stance, but in the fact that in silencing the voices of those who serve domination, critical theories are generally unable to reconstruct the conditions of possibility that have seen these voices partake in acts of violent subjugation. This ensures that an aspect of lived reality that is explanatorily necessary to effect any tentative change in the world is lost. By contrast, what I seek to offer here is not “a politics of *who*” does wrong, why they do wrong, or how we might (ever) stop those occurrences, but instead “a politics of *what* helps to open up” possibilities for change. (Mol-2002:184)

Second, I am interested in how the suspicious tendencies of critique leads to a devaluing of the ‘local’, ‘lay’, or ‘ordinary’ critical capacities of those we study. This exclusion emerges not only from the search for ‘deep’ explanations of social or political inequalities within discourse, power, race, or class, but also from the stylistic tendency to employ critical meta-languages whose form very often devalues the possibility of learning theoretically, conceptually, and – indeed – ethically from the voices whose worlds we study. The following discussion therefore hopes instead to meditate on what might improve the world “on its own terms” (Mol-2002:184) and, in doing so, reorient critique towards a

more caring ‘compositional’ outlook on the world (political). In particular, I suggest that moving forward requires we take ‘lay’ (critical) thinking more seriously and, in doing so, come to appreciate the sometimes homologous qualities of critique across social fields (c.f.: Boltanski-2011;Felski-2015).

Perhaps counter-intuitively, I want to suggest in the full argument that follows that these two exclusions, and several other dilemmas facing critical inquiry, might be overcome *not* by rejecting but, instead, by actively *leveraging* the interstitial positionality of the ‘*parasitic-researcher*’ for the ethico-political good. If parasitism is innate to research, I argue, then this parasitism is actually what gifts (critical) research its capacity to collect, gather, and combine *multiple* aspects of socio-political experience in ways that individual humans or collectivities cannot. It is our ability to *move* through the world that is key. And few creatures move as opportunistically as the parasite. But, I also want to say, the hermeneutics of suspicion chastens these virtues of the *parasitic-researcher* by encouraging overly immobile or fixed critical ethico-political positions. Against this, the parasitic critique I lay out is conceptualized as an effort to build relations, connections, and points of communication between a multiplicity of (normatively, politically, socially) distant sites. The goal is to use this positionality to draw out the conditions of possibility for world political bads (or, indeed, goods) through a multi-vocal engagement with the tortured and the torturers, the terrorized and the terrorists, the critical theorist and her subjects. Drawing out homologies, relations, and points of sympathy between these very distant figures, I hope to show how a parasitic critique might offer insights into how the “cruel systems” built “upon the horror of disorder and noise” could one day be disrupted (Serres-1982:14).

I now proceed in three parts. I begin by dwelling on my own experiences interviewing victims *and* perpetrators of torture in order to outline the abuse-values I have enacted through my own use of a hermeneutics of suspicion. With that confessional in mind, I move to reflecting more broadly on the status of critical approaches to studying world politics, and their dilemmas, exclusions, and other shortcomings. The second section then begins by suggesting that critical IR must embrace the homologous nature of critique across multiple political sites. It is argued that doing so allows us to uncover a hidden reserve of alternative critical attitudes or styles within quite distant domains of social life. On this basis, the section draws out an alternative ‘style’ of critique derived from the lessons provided by one extended ‘lay’ critical theory of political violence that I then combine with Serres’ understanding of social relations as layerings of parasitic behaviour. This alternative style is shown to support the view that critique can proceed productively without imposing suspicious judgments. The third section then conceptualizes that alternative critical sensibility methodologically by arguing that developing its meta-theoretical basis requires a turn to the concept of ‘composition’ – in its aesthetic (Dabrowski-1995) and material-semiotic (Mol-2002; Latour-2010) senses – as a method for its concrete enactment. I conclude by laying out guidelines for composing parasitic critiques that shift us from *suspicion* to *learning*, *exclusion* to *combination*, and – finally – from *contradiction* to *composition*.

### **The Barbarity of Critique**

For a moment, let me be concrete: “No theory, I beg you” (Serres-1982:134). In the autumn of 2014, I was walking through the streets of Tripoli, Northern Lebanon. Unlike Beirut, Tripoli retains something of the past. Although its urban sprawl resembles the concrete dystopias found today across the world, the old city centre maintains elements of its architectural and socio-cultural heritage, with men selling their wares on the street (albeit that those wares now include bootleg films or music alongside more traditional fare) and people moving through inhabitable rather than commodified space. I stopped, just before dusk, at a garden café and ordered a tea and *argilla* (*sbisha*), setting down

with a notebook as I greeted those sitting at the adjacent tables. In the same area, a few days earlier, the old *souq* had been beset by fierce battles between ‘Islamist’ militants and the Lebanese Army (as well as, in the shadows, *Hezbollah’s* forces). The black banner of *Daish* was being plastered over the doors and walls of mosques, and the army was setting up camp in the old citadel, laying out mortars in its ancient walls, preparing to shell its own city. Bashar Al-Assad’s forces did much the same in Aleppo and Damascus a few years earlier, where crusader-era castles and French mandate prisons were repurposed (Hauslohner and Ramadan-2013). Folds of suffering, layered across time: stone, gunpowder, hilltops, militaries, militants, and death. A little earlier that day I had met a bearded man proclaiming himself “Al-Qaeda, a follower of Bin Laden, you know, fighting with the *dawleh?*”<sup>2</sup> He laughed as I slowly ate falafel. None of this was of much concern to me at that particular moment.

Instead, I was pausing to prepare for an interview with Fawaz Al-Zakaria, a Lebanese national detained for five years in Syria. And I was apprehensive. This apprehension was both practical, as my Arabic struggled to assimilate the argot of prison life: *to fall in the shower* (to die during torture), *the tire* (a method of torture), and – more substantively – ethical, political, as well as analytical (UMAM-2012). These concerns first arose as my conversations with men like Fawaz became unexpectedly intimate. Following Spradley’s (1979) ethnographic interviewing method, these dialogues increasingly prompted physical re-enactments of the experiences of prisoners:

*I ask Fawaz about the different techniques – how exactly did they do that, how were they standing, how did they move your body? Fawaz pauses... “It is difficult to say, to remember, but look this is the German Chair.” He stands up quickly, and pulls a chair from his desk, he demonstrates how the chair was used to contort his back upwards with his legs fixed to its [own] legs. He stands up, and switches to demonstrating the “dulab [tire]” by pulling his chest forward, his head bowed past his knees, and his arms around them- “here,” he says, “my arms are around the tire, and then they beat you.” I am struck, in this moment, by his clothes: dressed in a suit, meeting me in between clients...*

<...>

*Fawaz clearly sees that his use of the term ‘the train’ has confused me so... he stands up once again... “Lie down,” on the couch, he says. I worry about my shoes, dirty from the streets, but he insists and lies me prone. He then lies down beside me; his feet at my head, and my feet at his head. He stands up and says- “the train, that’s how we slept, so many in one room” Somewhat at a loss for words after this, Fawaz offers to make us tea.<sup>3</sup>*

The way Fawaz re-enacted his experiences here was common in my conversations with figures like him. Indeed, these re-enactments often emerged unprompted, drawing me into the world of torture and creating a rupture in the (imagined) line demarcating myself as Subject and interlocutor as Object. Fawaz purposefully communicated his experiences not by ‘translating’ them but by *transposing* me into his place. With Garfinkel (1967), Fawaz’s re-enactments thus created the torture scene for me as if it were happening for the *first time through* (which it was, for me). Indeed, the frequency with which individuals ‘re-play’ important events to themselves, whether or not an observer is present, reveals the *sometimes* homologous hermeneutic techniques by which we all, social scientists or not, discover insights into our shared worlds. But when interlocutors draw an *observer* into these re-livings of trauma, it seems to me as if the intention is to evoke in the everyday what Huysmans and Aradau (2014:608) describe as the use of critical ‘acts’ in order to ‘rupture’ our knowledge of the world through the “experimental connecting and assembling” of the research encounter. We as researchers are being manipulated towards understanding, rather than revealing any particular ‘truth’ ourselves.

Below, I try to show how these everyday critical interventions allow for the transcendence of a

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<sup>2</sup> Author’s field notes 06.11.14.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

suspicious hermeneutics. First, however, I want to dwell on the fact that it is at such moments of researcher-interlocutor intimacy when the everyday abuse-values of research come into sharp view. These abuses are most obvious in the apologetic embarrassment expressed when a notebook is opened, a camera is taken out, or a dictaphone begins recording. But acts of rupture provoked by interlocutors are – more substantively – also a direct ethico-political *challenge* to the researcher. When drawn performatively into the experiences of others, those others actively seek to convert research into a vehicle for *use* and *exchange*. The demand is that we stretch our minds and bodies to *really* experience their worlds. But this is not what we usually seek from such conversations, as those we speak with know. Take the Moroccan novelist Khadija Marouzai's (2000:139) *Biography of Ashes*, where the tortured protagonist *Leila* addresses the reader thus:

Burned by the whip and electricity, *I will bear the burden of arranging all of this for you*, so that you can stretch out in bed, or put one leg over another in a cafe, and read my pain.

*Leila*'s sardonic words that her burden is to “arrange all of this for you” reveal the innate inequalities that lie at the heart of translating lived experience into academic analysis. Typically, critical analysis has hierarchically situated itself as the purveyor of ‘arranging’ *theory*, while interlocutors are expected to work as ‘sources’ arranging data for us in (more or less) neat stories demonstrating the utility of those theories. But when a researcher, like myself, is inserted directly into a re-enacted scene of some phenomenon, this division of labour changes: it is now the researcher themselves that must dwell with the complexity of life as it occurs everyday, irrelevant any theory. And – clearly – interlocutors themselves enacting these ruptures implies a responsibility to engage with their interventions. But critical IR finds it difficult to live up to this responsibility. More often than not, our subjects of study have found they cannot “control what is written and said about them” by “parasitic scholars” (Deloria-1972:96) who fit their words into something quite alien to them. This betrayal is innate, perhaps, to the task of translating experience into narrative: “to be a friend is to stand in a relationship of trust... to be a writer is to violate that trust for the sake of one’s story” (Mills in Eakin-2004:105).

Among approaches that advocate ‘doing something’ with critique, the common response to this risk of parasitism has been to advocate for methods that are driven by taking “a position in the world” through the privileging of a “partial perspective” (Haraway-1988). However, this urge can also be seen as an attempt to parasitically *echo* the lay ruptures of our interlocutors. We copy, mimic and ‘get in print’ what we have been told or seen or heard. Of course, those echoes are intended to reach a wider audience and, classically, much scholarship in IR uses consciousness-raising or a politics of exposure as its ethico-political justification. More than this, the approach often ‘suspends’ elements of the hermeneutics of suspicion in critical theory by gifting the voices of the subjugated who lack speaking positions greater space than others. But this is only achieved by silencing other (“subjugating”) voices who remain under the gaze of a hermeneutics of suspicion. Indeed, to get back to Fawaz, my unease in interviewing men like him related to an *inability* to take a position. That inability related to the fact that I was simultaneously carrying out of interviews with *perpetrators* of torture in Syria, interviews that were adding troubling ‘noise’ to my understanding of its ontology and ethico-political implications.

Traditionally, engaging with perpetrators – however blurred that concept is (Zimbardo-2007) – has been a means of unmasking a superstructure of power relations. But, for me, no such superstructure was coming into view. For example, while interviewing a defected former intelligence agent, *Adel*, I followed up to a description of his involvement in the beating to death of a prisoner with the questions “and how did that happen, what did you think while you did that?” The response came:

I told you, I told you a hundred times. I don’t remember, it just *happened around me*. Why can’t you,

why can't anyone else, understand this? Enough.<sup>4</sup>

These words reprimanded me for my failure to listen to the countless previous renditions of the same point: something “just happened.”<sup>5</sup> The positionality of the researcher becomes parasitic here in a particular sense:

There are three meanings to the word *parasite* in French: the organism that lives on another, the guest who ends up annoying his host, and “the static background noise that interrupts or distorts messages and thereby creates misunderstandings and communicative interruptions (*malentendus*). (Assad-2000:275).

Here, the researcher or ‘guest’ simply cannot hear what they are being told. Specifically, the *malentendus* found in the passage above relate to the tendency to overlook the fact that the words “*it just happened around me*” may not signify ignorance on the part of the interlocutor, their enmeshing in an *illusio* rendering them incapable of expressing the ‘reality’ of their situation (Bourdieu-1998:77). Following again Garfinkel (1967:68), such remarks may not be indicative of a “cultural dope” but, rather, contain a clear understanding of, and attempt to communicate, a relative impotence, not ignorance, before ‘what happened.’ However, the suspicious hermeneutics of critical IR makes it very hard to inquire into these words, as I try to show below. Instead, the task has usually been to see the words of men like Adel as things to be deconstructed and fitted into a schema revealing an approximate ‘truth’.

Having spoken to Fawaz, Adel, and others, the question that disturbed me was thus simple: to judge or not to judge? To take a position *against* Adel, and with Fawaz, or not? I was troubled because, honestly, I had begun to sympathize with the torturers I had met, as I learned slowly of the impersonal violent systems that they had (most unusually inadvertently) found themselves enmeshed within (Austin&Bocco-2017). But the problem was greater than this. The words I was hearing from *both* men like *Fawaz* and *Adel* – *both* tortured and torturer – often undermined the injunction to take a position, expose a wrongdoing, and make a judgment. As I show below, they suggested something very different indeed. It took me some time to realize this, however, due to a common social scientific unwillingness to take seriously ‘lay’ knowledge. As Boltanski (2011:4) argued, ‘lay’ actors are most typically seen as only being able to express *criticism* (or ‘ordinary critique’) but such ‘ordinary critique’ is generally diminished in worth for its drawing problematically upon “spiritual and/or moral resources of a *local* character.” A distinction is drawn here then “between the partial critiques developed by... actors on the basis of their experiences and the *systematic* critique of a particular social order” (Ibid:6). Within IR, this understanding gained prominence with the use of poststructuralist thought to critique the dominance of particular discursive understandings of the world that veiled oppression, exploitation, or domination (c.f. Milliken-1999). These dominating discourses were unveiled at a meta-theoretical systemic level of abstraction, divorced from life as it is experienced.

As Abraham and Abramson (2017:6) write, the difficulty is that this approach is that it “reinscribes a particular mode of domination: a top-down and an elitist approach to knowledge production.” The vision here is of a certain hierarchy of critique in which critical theorists decide for others the appropriate targets of criticism but, in doing so, miss “a pragmatic theorization of the public, those who are dominated” (Ibid:7-8). And, most importantly, this approach buttresses the tendency to treat *all* interlocutors with a great degree of suspicion. It was for this reason that I quoted one particular section from my dialogues with Fawaz, above. One remark contained within them particularly struck me on reading them back: “*Fawaz pauses.*” Thinking through this pause, I turned to the basics of conversation analysis:

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with *Adel* [Pseudonym] in Beirut by the author, 17.12.2014.

<sup>5</sup> On these ‘happenings’ see Austin (2016;2017).

Pauses are also significant. Whenever a person is talking about a subject of consequence to himself, he goes through a process of advanced self-monitoring [and so holds things back], performed at lightning speed.

Here, and hopefully the reader will (temporarily) forgive the lack of citation, the researcher is encouraged to be suspicious of an innocuous pause. When we *do* critical IR we learn “to become suspicious of *everything* people say because... they live in the thralls of a complete *illusio* of their real motives.” (Latour-2004:229) Indeed, the hermeneutics of suspicion takes interlocutors as sources of ‘data’ while silencing their self-interpretations. Consider, for example, Huggins and Haritos-Philip’s (2002) *Violence Workers*. Here, Huggins and Haritos-Philip speak of methods for “outing” perpetrators of torture, engaging in research “espionage” to “penetrate” the defenses and secrecy of perpetrators, “deposing atrocity,” and guarding against the “seductions” of interlocutors (Ibid:45-52). The goal is to expose the truth behind the actions of these figures, essentially irrelevant what they say.

The most troubling deficiency of a hermeneutics of suspicion employed in this way is its introduction of substantive ‘blanks’ into critique. These blanks emerge especially strongly due to a further step that quite typically emerges in critical IR: *denunciation*. Here, a clear subject of responsibility for world political bads is defined and critiqued. This subject can be abstract (biopolitics, the culture industry, etc.) or not but it is usually thereafter personified within individuals at least *sewing* that dominating force and who become subjects that must be ‘blamed’ for a failure to advance critical ‘progress’ in world politics. Serres (1995:147) laments this move thus:

Why does philosophy... take the role of public prosecutor? The role of denouncer? <...> The thought of a philosophy that uses police-type methods – to the point of trying to be cleverer than Inspector Dupin – and that criticizes in order to subpoena... appalls me.

The reason scholars employ “police-type methods” to “prosecute” those held responsible relates to the view that “if we allow the deeds of human rights abusers to go unchallenged and unpunished, we are all responsible for the evils they commit...” (Huggins&Haritos-Phillip-2002:267). The paradox here, however, is that by ‘blanking’ out those we implicate in world political bads, we often simultaneously neglect the need to understand what made their actions possible, *in the moment*. Put differently, the ethico-political move to denunciation over-simplifies the world by introducing black and white moral judgments that erase the lived complexities through which the object of critique comes into existence. Indeed, take Enloe’s (2000) feminist understanding of how “gender makes the world go round.” Enloe (2000:17) suggests that “a book about international politics ought to leave one with a sense that ‘I can do something’” but that most texts leave the impression that it’s “all so complex” that we cannot act. For Enloe (Ibid), stressing complexity is the mark of non-engaged critical inquiries whose embrace of complexity undermined the fact of the world as having been “made” and thus being open to “remaking.” And while the latter point is undoubtedly true, the nature of the remaking typically posited is problematic because of its basis on a now *too simplified* denunciation founded on a hermeneutics of suspicion that implies identifying ‘who’ is doing wrong in the world can somehow better the world. We must add then to Abraham and Abramson’s (2017:7-8) words that the suspicious style of critical IR tends to miss “a pragmatic theorization of... those who are dominated.” It also misses a theorization of the tools of domination themselves: men like Adel.

### **Thymic Education and the *Parasitic-Researcher***

Let me ask you to go back to my conversation with Fawaz and – specifically – my dwelling on the notion that “pauses are also significant” (*p. 6, above*). Earlier, I included only a snippet of this advice, which continues as follows:

<...> When questions or answers get close to sensitive areas, pre-scanning is likely to create mental blocks. These... produce unnatural pauses, meaningless sounds... or other interruptions. It is not easy to distinguish between innocent blocks... and guilty blocks – *things the interrogator needs to know*. (CIA 1963:56)

Reference to the *interrogator* here is not a slip of the tongue. Instead, this advice comes from the *KUBARK [CIA] Counterintelligence Manual*, which indulges in an exposition of close-to-Sacksian conversation analysis. The CIA (1963:64) advocate a deliberately open-ended interviewing style, in which we should be “free to observe” since “human beings communicate a great deal by non-verbal means” and “skilled interrogators... listen closely to voices and learn a great deal from them.” Learning to interrogate seems little different to taking a class in (more or less critical) ethnography.

My intention in withholding the source of this advice earlier was not to ignore its significance or manipulate the reader. Instead, it was to echo my own discovery of these similes between the practice of research and violence: a slow, surprising, realization. And my interest in bringing this up now is to stress how the styles of research are not hermetically sealed within the humanities or social science. Indeed, the various rhetorical, technical, or practical types of social critique can be located across social fields (Felski-2015;Zournazi-2002). Thus, when Serres compared the denunciations of critique to Edgar Allan Poe’s *Inspector Dupin*, he was drawing a link between non-scientific forms of reasoning and critical expression. In this understanding, the hermeneutics of suspicion underlying critical IR is simply one variation on a culturally broader rhetorical employment of ‘detectivist’ genres of writing, seen more publicly in spy, police, or mystery stories. However, the dangers of this style of thinking have become clear as its reasoning has been employed in the apparently distant realms of conspiracy theorists, populist movements, climate change deniers, and beyond (Marcaso-2016;Latour-2004).

These similes between the suspicious hermeneutics of critical IR and the rhetorical styles of fiction, security politics, or ordinary life are disturbing, at least to me. However, if the *current* methods of critical inquiry can find echoes in distant social fields, then – I want to propose – these realms may then also be hiding a reserve of alternative critical rhetorical styles waiting to be found and used by IR. They might be found in the critical acts of Fawaz or Adel. Or elsewhere. Indeed – *anywhere*. In fact, a route away from the hermeneutics of suspicion emerged, for me, in the fictional, semi-fictional, and/or autobiographical memoirs of Syrian political prisoners. In particular, the alternative critical style outlined in this essay is inspired by one Syrian prison memoir entitled *From Tadmor to Harvard*, which contains a theoretical rendition of the problems of authoritarianism, political violence, and social struggle (Sarraj-2011b). Its author – Barra Sarraj – spent twelve years as a prisoner in Syria before emigrating to the United States and becoming a scientist in the field of evolutionary immunology. He explains what motivated this move thus:

I wanted to study immunology to understand what went wrong in Syria. I believe we can derive a lot of lessons from this defense department. (Sarraj-2011a:7)

He has summarized those lessons for us through a theory termed *immunopolitics*: a metaphorical rendition of the body politic as a site of struggle between conflicting cells that begins with the following description of inflammation:

The hallmark of inflammation is infiltration by white blood cells... [that] sense there is something wrong and... come to fight... Inflammation is a side effect of your body fighting outsiders... The body will not accept the outsiders... unless you suppress the immune system with immunosuppressant drugs. (Hanano-2011)

For Sarraj, the cells of Syria’s prisons contain its “white blood cells” – “educated professionals in the unions, or the journalists, or the intellectuals, or the leaders of the demonstrations” – who are being targeted by a regime seeking to weaken “the immune system, because if those cells are eliminated, the

body cannot fight back” (Hanano-2011). Sarraj’s discussion of violence and conflict is, however, only a stepping-stone towards theorizing how socio-political change might occur within this system. As one of his anecdotes explains:

Ghassan [a fellow prisoner] was taken [arrested] when he was fifteen, and was the last to be released when he was forty. I told Ghassan, ‘I’m really happy that I met you. I don’t regret being arrested just to know you.’ This is *thymic education*: teaching the cells how to behave, *to know each other, and to know their enemy by mixing*. It’s an amazing term in immunology. (Hanano-2011)

This notion of ‘thymic education’ hints at something much more than the ‘resistance’ of subjugated populations (to which critical theory has paid much attention). The concept focuses on processes of combinatorial *learning* among *disparate* individuals placed confined together: learning about themselves, others, and – yes – “the enemy”. For Sarraj, this occurs between prisoners of entirely different socio-political persuasions: mainly secular-communist prisoners and ‘Islamist’ prisoners who came to ‘mix’ in jail and *learn* from one another in ways that they had never done outside its walls. Within Syria, and elsewhere in the Middle East, these groups have long been enemies locked in quite violent and exclusionary conflict. Thymic education is thus a metaphor for the ways in which the *mixing* of multiple perspectives, rather than the privileging a particular vantage points produces novel future strategies for “how to behave.” It is a vision that embraces complexity, without succumbing to paralysis. Most importantly, thymic education does *not* employ a hermeneutics of suspicion. Instead, Sarraj develops a kind of ‘combinatorial hermeneutics’ in which creating any silenced ‘blank’ through the personification of a denounced representative of the forces of domination or power is unsatisfactory. Instead, the approach takes seriously the words of torturers that they *don’t know* what happened. It is a method of critique that seeks to understand how it is possible that something so seemingly ‘superfluous’ as socio-political evil goes on anyhow, each and every day (c.f.:Ophir-2005).

The sophistication of the critiques developed by figures like Sarraj reveal how limiting is any belief in a hierarchy of critical capacities (c.f. Boltanski-2011). Indeed, it is my belief that exploring homologies in the styles and methods of critique across social fields can provide insights leading us beyond a hermeneutics of suspicion. To see this more fully, let’s return to Sarraj and combine his notion of *thymic education* and its combinatorial hermeneutics with Serres’ image of the parasite. The process of learning described by Sarraj in his conversations with Ghassan emerged because of the differences between these men, placed in enforced confinement together. The experiences of prisoners across the world, who paradoxically cite what they *learned* from being in close contact with others whom they would not normally have contact with, echoes this claim: it is by (often painfully) combining *difference* that learning occurs. Importantly, this fact can be directly counterposed to the injunction to ‘take a position’ and, in doing so, elevate one particular voice above another, rather than experimenting with their combination. Indeed, the act of taking a position is interesting for echoing, in a way, the *biological* form of the parasite, as Serres (1982:202) writes:

To avoid the unavoidable reactions of rejection, exclusion, a (biological) parasite makes or secretes tissue identical to that of its host... The parasited, abused, cheated body no longer reacts; it accepts; it acts as if the visitor were its own organ... The parasite plays a game of mimicry.

To privilege a partial perspective that is not one’s own is a form of mimicry. The alternative is to “play at being another” (Ibid) as researcher and drawing on the fluid perspective this otherness (or ‘difference’) provides. And this alternative is very simply operationalized in critical research. Perhaps one of the greatest privileges of being able to conduct critical inquiry *as an occupation* rests on the freedom to move, jump, and skip through distinct places, voices, texts, and other sources in ways that are not possible for most individuals in this world. In short, critical research is typically about *movement*. As Clifford (1997:11) puts it, we can take up “a view of human location as constituted by

displacement as much as stasis” and thus that:

[Thinking...] is a process of locating oneself in space and time. And a location... is an *itinerary* rather than a bounded site- a series of encounters and translations (Ibid:11).

The researcher, critical or not, follows this logic entirely: the knowledge we produce is marked not by innate sophistication but, rather, by the way in which it can “draw together” the experiences of men like Fawaz, Sarraj, and Adel, of countless others, and combine these with a vast repertoire of textual, visual, or objectified inscriptions (Latour-1986). To research is to travel, in some sense, across worlds. The virtues of this notion of research-as-movement is that it situates the researcher in a *para-site* (to ignore half the Latin) that is “near” or “next to” something, circulating around it, but not mimetically playing “at being the same” (Serres-1982:144). The biological understanding of the parasite gets closest to this conceptualization of research-as-movement but, to connect it to the notion of thymic education, we can go back to the third French meaning of the term parasite: *static noise*. By gathering together several *para-sites* of social activity, noise is introduced into understanding of society: things get more complicated, chaotic, and fluid than before, but this noise also enables action. Indeed, noise is the kind of difference on which thymic education feeds through its combinatorial hermeneutics and the parasitic positionality of the researcher can introduce differences that ‘lay’ figures often cannot: not because their knowledge is less valid but because their movement is more restricted. This is the point in symmetrically interviewing victims and perpetrators of violence and in seeing their stories as interconnected, even sympathetic. The *parasitic-researcher* may move to ‘use-value’, thus, if their *socio-biological* parasitism is converted into *noisy* parasitism: effecting unexpected combinations that surprise and intrigue. To return to Marouzai’s *Leila*, the challenge is therefore to find new critical reconstructive perspectives that take up the “burden” of “arranging” not just the *theory* but also the ‘data’, ‘experiences’, and/or frequently mutually contradictory ‘lifeworlds’ of social reality from our interlocutors. This move requires we suspend any suspicious hermeneutic gaze and employ instead “powerful descriptive [tools] that *embrace complexity*” in order to transform “the critical urge into the ethos of someone who *adds*” to reality rather than always “subtracting [from] it” (Latour-2004:232).

### Composing Parasitic Critiques

What does all this mean? Ultimately, I want to suggest that a parasitic critique represents an orientating sensibility focused on reordering the methods of critique, with the hope of cultivating a non-judgmental ethic of ‘care-full’ analysis and description. This sensitivity connects deeply with emerging work in IPS focused on listening and hearing the world in all its complexity, vulnerability, and value (Brighi 2016, Harrington 2016). One key advantage in considering ourselves *parasitic-researchers* when thinking in these terms, however, is its discomforting effects: welcoming our parasitic status forces a constant awareness of the failures, co-options, and violences intrinsic to critical work (Sjoberg-2019; Kessler-2016; Burke *etal*-2016). The term can thus operate as a way to “collectively reject the paralyzing fear of [the] failure” of critique by embracing failure and normative ambiguity as intrinsic to its potential (Lisle, Squire, and Doty 2017, 4). Engaging the parasitic status of critique would then be about seeking to reverse the gaze of the hermeneutics of suspicion back on the *practice of critique* itself, while gifting the world it explores the freedom to lead the direction critique takes (Austin *et al*-2019). In this, parasitic critiques are “welcoming [to] surprise” because “to be surprised is also to be intellectually humbled, to lose one’s authority, to loosen one’s posture of control over meaning. Surprise, then, may be an opportunity for change” (Ravecca and Dauphinee-2018:11).

With that said, getting to a *care-full* critique, parasitic though it may or must be, requires several difficult moves. To begin, it demands that we continue efforts across IR (via its narrative, visual,

aesthetic, etc. turns<sup>6</sup>) to re-order the *creative* practice of critique. Indeed, the word critique stems from the Greek notion of a critical *art* (*tekhnē*). Alone, critique is never science but a speculative ‘artistic’ creation. Of course, this creative facet of critique is well served by a hermeneutics of suspicion. Suspicion *is* a very creative style of thought that rhetorically counter-poses, contrasts, and places into differentiation statements (or persons or entities), particular material elements of the world, and other things to reveal contradictions. Things that seem like they shouldn’t be, but are. This is why, in most critical theory today, creating “irresolution, contradiction, and doubleness... [are deemed] intellectual virtues” (Felski-2015:69). Contradiction is the creative tool drawn on by the hermeneutics of suspicion. But are there other creative tools through which a *care-full* parasitic critique could operate that would not necessarily rely on the search for contradiction, power, domination, or the like?

I offer just one, here: *composition*. This is a word that has cropped up in the preceding pages many times. To see its relevance, consider the words of the Syrian dissident Yassin Al-Haj Saleh (2012) who described the prison where he was tortured, simply, as “a monster” and that:

It seems [to me] that we cannot tame this monster unless we adapt ourselves to it also. What I mean is that we need to accept the prison, and ourselves as prisoners, irrelevant whatever we used to be outside of it. We must allow the monster [of prison] to compose [تأليف] us.

Words like these reflect how the world (political) is composed as an object of individual apprehension, and gains a collectively coherent understanding, through our embedding in an incoherent, complex, messy, and non-linear set of relations with other humans, non-humans, or objects. These relations ‘compose’ us, whether we like it or not, and carry across borders (mis)understandings of what the world is, could be, and means. This can be expressed, of course, vis-à-vis the experience of great pain (torture, imprisonment), immense joy (revolution, emancipation), or the banal rituals of the everyday (work, eating): each situation, scene, or setting that makes meaning in the world is composed multiply in ways that alter the world’s subjectivities, trajectories, and futures.

Turning from contradiction to composition is therefore about integrating a politics of *what*, rather than *who*, into critique (Mol-2002). For example: a world political composition might ask how, sometimes, an entire ethical philosophy and reflection on conditions of exile can be grounded – simply – in childhood memories of the smells of boiling coffee pots or sounds of marching boots. Indeed, it has been said the entire oeuvre of Sartre can only be understood “once we trace the ways in which the particular type of ‘meeting between strangers’ that occurred in Paris sidewalk cafes, is inscribed in [that work]... For this is the puzzling situation Sartre (always also) thought about” (Mol-2008:33). Such chains of meaning, from fragmented sensings of the world upwards to entire theories, symphonies, or artworks, are what interests a compositional perspective: how we get from A to B, from fleeting experience to inscribed object. The perspective would ask, for further example, a scholar studying terrorism to consider how that phenomenon comes to (multiplicitously) make sense, to the ‘terrorist’ themselves, her victims, and those simply standing by. It would be to ask how the phenomenon of terrorism flows on to our screens as an object of apprehension through a vast array of hidden (material or not) infrastructures that ‘make real’ the masked men appearing before us and gesturing before orange-clad bodies. And it would ask how those masked men on the screen got there. What were the sights, sounds, smells, touches and tastes that got them there. How bitter were those senses? How did they escalate? Chain together all the way to that terrible moment now being watched, far away, probably, by someone else on a screen, changing them too (see Austin-2019).

Concretely, a compositional method might find many different individual articulations. One example,

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<sup>6</sup> See *inter alia* Bleiker-2001,2018; Ravecca and Dauphinee-2018.

however, is provided by Latour (2010) who speaks specifically of moving beyond critique through a ‘compositionist’ outlook on the world that:

Underlines that things have to be put together (Latin *componere*) while retaining their heterogeneity. Also, it is connected with composure; it has clear roots in art, painting, music, theater, dance... it is not too far from “compromise” and “compromising,” retaining a certain diplomatic and prudential flavor. Above all, a composition can fail and thus retains what is most important in the notion of constructivism... What is to be composed may, at any point, be decomposed (Latour-2010:473-4).

This understanding follows from the tenants of material-semiotic sociological approaches like Actor-Network Theory (ANT), which have many parallels with the parasitic critique outlined here. But Latour – of course – is an odd ally. His work has often been labeled anti-critical for flattening the social world and evading questions of agency, power, inequality, and domination in ways that (almost) appear to naturalize the workings of the world (c.f. Harman-2016). The perspective thus misses the complexities of the emotional, affective, social, and political qualities of social phenomena. It is useful, nonetheless, in its redirection of our thought towards the necessity of embracing post-human critical engagements, and seeing how in cases like Al-Haj Saleh’s (above), objects like blindfolds, walls, and chairs all worked towards composing his own suffering in the “monster” of his prison. Nonetheless, the aesthetic roots of composition in “art, painting, music, theater, dance” do allow us to turn away from Latour towards other understandings of composition. Indeed, the consistent focus on styles of critique throughout this discussion demands now a consideration of composition itself as a rhetorical, aesthetic, and ultimately *exhibitionist* exercise. At its base, social scientific critique has always been ‘exhibitionist’ in the sense “that every scientist addresses himself or herself to colleagues who are ‘keeping vigil’” (Despret-2016:29-36). The term exhibitionist is useful here for stressing how the composition of critique involves the active consideration of how its form impacts upon an audience affectively, emotionally, and reflexively. A compositional approach thus requires that:

...social scientists consider their places of work as places of exhibition [in order to] renew a literal definition of the public dimension of scientific practices... and... confer on them at the same time an aesthetic dimension. In place of routine and repetitive protocols, scientists could instead substitute inventive tests through which [their subjects] could show what they are capable of when we take the trouble of giving them propositions that are likely to interest them. The researchers would explore new questions that would have no meaning other than to be welcomed by those to whom the propositions are made. Each experiment, then, would become a true performance and would require tact, imagination, consideration, and attention (Despret 2016, 35).

Consciously acknowledging the exhibitionist quality of critique might, in this understanding, allow us to playfully tinker with its practice in a way that avoids self-exhibitionism (i.e. composing critique only for the academic field). Indeed, to extend this line of thinking it is worth turning now to the theories of the abstract artist Wassily Kandinsky, for whom the term composition was central. For Kandinsky, composition is a technical but also ‘spiritual’ exercise that represents the coming together of a set of:

Clashing discords, loss of equilibrium, principles overthrown, unexpected drumbeats, great questionings... purposeless strivings, stress and longing... chains and fetters broken.... (Lindsay and Vergo 1994, 193)

Describing how this chaos and complexity can be coherently and meaningfully drawn together, Kandinsky distinguishes between an *impression* – “a direct impression of outward nature, expressed in purely artistic form” – an *improvisation* – an “unconscious, spontaneous expression of inner character, the non-material nature” – and, finally, the *composition*: “An expression of slowly formed inner feeling, which comes to utterance only after long maturing... In this, reason, consciousness, purpose, play an overwhelming part. But of the calculation nothing appears, only the feeling” (Ibid). For Kandinsky, the compositional is primary in the ways in which it combines, and so overcomes, the relative limitations of both our mimetic engagement with the world – what we *sense*, what comes to ‘positive’ experience – and how that worldly sensibility feeds into our unconscious, spontaneous – and

somehow ineffable – being in the world (c.f. Bleiker-2001). Simply put, composition is about turning what we experience in the world as we (parasitically) travel around it (what leaves traces or *impressions* upon us) with a set of *improvised* theoretical shufflings of those impressions around on the canvas (or page) until – in the end – some kind of ‘harmony’ is achieved. In this, then, he accords with Serres’ words that “evil resides in the fact that we overindulge our ‘blessed rage for order’ and insidiously violate chaos by forcing it into the straitjacket of order” (Assad 2000, 282). There is no strict ‘order’ or simplification in the compositions of Kandinsky: there is only ceaseless movement. There is only the endless shuffling around of the parasite. An attempt to *care-fully* bring noise to the world.

Noise of this kind turns the critical artifact less into an oppositional and more an affectual device that does work through its aesthetic form (c.f. Aradau and Huysmans-2014). Indeed, if this route is taken then critical expression comes to ally closely with artistic or literary forms that do not speak in terms of any *who* (though it may be implied) but instead expresses the *what*. For example, the work of Franz Kafka rarely designates a *who* – his novels are intrinsically “impersonal” (c.f. Blanchot-1993) – but this does not neuter the normativity of his message(s). If Orwell’s *Animal Farm* was a polemical indictment of a particular set of ‘theys’, then Kafka’s *Das Prozess* is a gentle meditation on the ‘whats’ of oppression. And both – I should say – are compositions. To think in terms of composition and parasitic critiques is not to exclude (personified) suspicion. It is to *complement it*. With Annemarie Mol (2002:184):

Not going *primarily* with a *politics of who* but stressing the necessity of a *politics of what* helps to open up the professional domain instead of pushing it back. And doubting whether choice is the best term to use in a politics of what (a politics that includes ontology rather than presuming it) acts against rationalist fantasies of what it is to strive after the good.

In order, however, for any compositionist outlook to reorder what it means to “strive after the good” it is my wager that it must be coupled with the combinatorial hermeneutics underlying the parasitic critique sketched above. Only then would we always be forewarned of the failures, co-options, and violences intrinsic to critique. Finally, then, what would that mean? Naturally, this would necessarily vary greatly from context to context, though a key starting point would remain the contributions of scholars working within the narrative, aesthetic, and visual turns who each differently employ elements of this compositional mode of critique.<sup>7</sup> Vis-à-vis composing specifically parasitic critiques, however, I believe it will be necessary to develop a set of sensitivities in which *suspicion* is replaced by *learning*, *exclusion* is replaced by *combination*, and *contradiction* is more often replaced by, yes, *composition*. And achieving this may require following – I want to conclude by proposing – three core principles.

First, sympathy *to* all is vital. A parasitic critique is about nurturing a care-full ‘openness’ to others, however strongly we might normatively disagree with their words, actions, or belief systems. It is only through this kind of sympathetic critique that we can achieve a fuller understanding of how what we disagree with has been composed. Cultivating this sympathy means turning away from Haraway’s (1988:191) view that “the ‘equality’ of positioning is a denial of responsibility and critical inquiry” if these words are considered in personified terms. While the equal positioning of the normative value of experience is deeply problematical, the life experiences, choices, and dilemmas of individuals must be treated equally if we hope to interrupt with what we deem negative. Achieving this interference requires the combination of multiple local voices, critiques and objects in ways that allow us to see how the world works, contradictions aside. Doing this means moving away from suspicion and towards sympathy. With Felski (2015:66), I want to work to think of people, texts, and beyond as objects that will – if we listen, watch, and speak to them hard enough – “gradually yield up... [their]

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<sup>7</sup> See *inter alia* Bleiker-2001,2018; Ravecca and Dauphinee-2018.

interpretative riches rather than being” objects to be suspiciously “probed for... [their] unconscious contradictions.” The goal is to move towards care-full compositions that draw out the *conditions of possibility* for world political bads through a multi-vocal engagement with the tortured and the torturers, the terrorized and the terrorists, or the critical theorist and each of her subjects. However difficult it is, a parasitic critique can have no blind spots, no black boxes, no exclusions: no blanks.

Second, finding points of sympathy *between* others, however opposed they seem, must become central to critique. This is the basic principle of thymic education: it *is* possible to learn from ‘enemies’. This intuition is related to the term *symbiosis*, which Harman (2016:45) reflects on by exploring the idea of punctuated equilibrium, the theoretical suggestion that “the gradual shaping of the gene pool through natural selection is a less important evolutionary force than the *watershed symbioses of distinct organisms*... key moments in human life rarely result from introspective brooding... [but] happen most often through symbiosis with a person, a profession, a city...” (Ibid:46). The “adaptions” made by men like Al-Haj Saleh to their “monsters” represent just such a (negative) symbiosis. For Harman, the notion of symbiosis reveals how the social world *changes*. For us, it thus also provides an insight into how we might ‘interfere’ with the social world critically by bringing into conversation objects that are typically separated. It is by finding symbioses between *distinct* ‘organisms’ – *torturer* and *tortured*, *subjugated* and *subjugator* – that we might move forward. And critical scholars are uniquely able to help here given their parasitic capacity to construct compositions from a host of different voices, sites, and sounds. But in doing so we must privilege none. We must keep moving. We must keep relentlessly composing. No fixed theory. No fixed perspective. And so – finally, and simply – in this relentless process of travelling, shuffling, and composing, I want to affirm the importance of *welcoming* the parasitism of critique, however much “use-value” we might make of its intrinsic “abuse-value.” Why?

Because if a parasitic critique can help in moving critical IR beyond its current impasse then it is only by engaging with men like Fawaz, Adel or Sarraj. This engagement, however, seems to suggest accepting the possibility of critical researchers no longer ‘leading’ their own projects but, instead, become more humble ‘mediators’ drawing on their parasitic capacities to travel through multiple worlds in order to combine and compose distinct opposing entities into novel configurations (c.f. Austin *et al*-2019). And with this, perhaps, the greatest use-value of the *parasitic-researcher* might emerge: by provoking a “new form of complexity,” this positionality can help “engineer a kind of difference by intercepting” and tracing “relations” (Brown 2004:390). And then “the question becomes,” simply, “more general”:

Such a parasite is responsible for the growth of the system’s complexity, such a parasite stops it. The... question is still there: are we [as *parasitic-researchers*] in the pathology of systems or in their emergence and evolution? (Serres-1982:14)

### **Beetles and Parasitic Critiques**

Let me return to Tripoli. To the point where my conversation with Fawaz drew to a close. How,” I then asked “did you survive, alone for so long, in solitary confinement?” At this question, Fawaz smiled unexpectedly and replied: “You know, people in prison sometimes do things that seem crazy. It’s not a normal place so people don’t behave normally, that’s clear.” He paused again. “But, in the *zinzaneb* (solitary confinement cell), I had visitors who helped me.” I raised my head at this, recalling Fawaz’s words that all visits were forbidden during his imprisonment. “Every day,” he continued:

A beetle came into my cell; he crawled through a crack in the wall. Each time he came I gave him some of the food I had saved, and he came back like that almost the whole time I was in that box. Now, don’t think I was crazy. OK maybe a little. But, when you are living in this cell, any sign of

the outside is welcome, it is hope.<sup>8</sup>

This experience of finding hope through little creatures like beetles is not uncommon (c.f. Dehn-2011:43). But I specifically bring up this story now as a metaphor for the *parasitic-researcher*. In doing this work, we must learn like prisoners themselves to change from being a “mainly vertical to a mainly horizontal creature” who no longer looks down suspiciously from positions of meta-theoretical abstraction on the world but – rather – sits horizontally in spaces of confinement while, also, offering all the ‘use’ we can by moving parasitically through space and walking through walls, like beetles (First-2010:5). Do that and we may just move critical theory a little further away from its abuse-values.

Above, I tried to show how that might work. I began by discussing how a hermeneutics of suspicion results in the taking-up of immobile fixed critical positions. This approach manifests countless ‘blanks’ in our understandings of the world. As an alternative, I have offered a parasitic critique based on a combinatorial hermeneutics that ‘learns’ from the *entirety* of the voices that make up world politics, employing a ‘compositional’ method as an alternative means of critique. In this argument in favour of a parasitic critique we moved, then, from *suspicion* to *learning*, *exclusion* to *combination*, and from *contradiction* to *composition*. The attempt to advocate for this approach – of course – has been a composition in and of itself. And it may have failed. But it is an attempt, simply, to show how a parasitic critique might draw on the fragments of knowledge we have about the negative phenomena that beset the world political to write a symmetrically fragmented guide to its conditions of possibility. In so doing, I hope, we might find ways to enter the black boxes where men like Fawaz were tortured, and untie, *from the inside*, the relations and experiences that saw them cast them into darkness.

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with Fawaz Al-Zakaria, Tripoli, Lebanon, 06.11.14.

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