

The Tragedy of Human Culture in the Age of Subtle Political Evil: From the Engineering of Submission to the Domestication of the Arab Elites

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Submitted 01.01.2025. Accepted: 02.04.2025. Published: 29.06.2025

Abstract

This study explores the functional transformation of human culture within the contemporary Arab context, beginning with the revealing moment marked by the Gaza War following October 7, 2023. While culture has historically been associated with emancipatory and moral functions, current realities expose a critical deviation in its role, whereby it has increasingly become an instrument in the hands of power—producing subjugation, domesticating elites, and legitimizing political malevolence. The study proceeds from a central hypothesis: culture has not failed because it is absent, but because it is present in counterproductive roles; and elites have not merely been marginalized, but reconfigured within symbolic systems that perform a functional role in consolidating order. Drawing on discourse analysis, the theory of political malevolence, and the critical approach to symbolic domination, the study proposes a new understanding of the relationship between culture and power. It further calls for the reclamation of culture's emancipatory function through the accountability of elites and the reconstruction of the nexus between meaning and freedom.

Keywords: Culture, Political Malevolence, Elite Domestication, Symbolic Domination, Arab Regimes

Introduction

Since its inception, human culture has been intrinsically linked to promises of liberation and elevation, serving as humanity's vehicle for transcending conditions of necessity toward the horizons of values and meaning. Yet, the historical trajectory of modernity—particularly within the Arab context—has revealed profound impasses, wherein culture shifted from an emancipatory instrument to a mechanism of symbolic regulation, and the intellectual was absorbed into the apparatus of governance rather than standing as its critical voice. The genocide in Gaza following October 7, 2023, emerges as an intensified mirror of this tragedy: media complicity, cultural silence, and the systematic containment of elites. This study seeks to deconstruct these transformations through a critical approach that interrogates the nexus between culture and power in an era of political malevolence, articulated across three central axes.

Research Problem

How has human culture shifted from an emancipatory project to an instrument for legitimizing political malevolence? And what is the nature of the new relationship between elites and power within the Arab context after October 7?

Hypotheses

Culture has not disappeared; rather, it has been reappropriated to legitimize both symbolic and material violence. The elite has shifted from bearing an emancipatory project to functioning as a symbolic apparatus in service of the regime.

In the aftermath of the Gaza War, Arab regimes have advanced their techniques of “soft engineering” of subjugation.

Methodology

This study adopts a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach as a primary tool for examining how power produces meanings and reshapes elites, drawing on the theoretical contributions of Foucault, Bourdieu, and Gramsci, while situating the analysis within the Arab socio-political context as a field for testing the proposed hypotheses. The methodology can be articulated as follows:

1- Type of Study

The research is analytical-critical in nature and follows a qualitative orientation, relying on discourse and content analysis to explore how culture and elites are mobilized in the service of political malevolence. It grounds its analysis in empirical examples drawn from the Arab context after October 7, 2023, with particular attention to the case of genocide in Gaza.

2- Research Approaches

Discourse Analysis: To examine the language, concepts, and symbols produced by power and by elites aligned with it.

Critical Theory: Drawing on insights from Foucault, Gramsci, Edward Said, and others to explain how cultural hegemony is constructed and subjugation reproduced.

Sociology of Culture: Investigating the institutional relationship between intellectuals and the state, and the transformation of culture into an instrument of symbolic legitimation.

The study is structured around the following axes:

Axis I: From an Emancipatory Project to a Mechanism of Symbolic Regulation

Culture as a Human Horizon: Through art, thought, religion, and language, culture historically functioned as a space of resistance and dignity.

Functional Transformation: The substitution of critique with justification, and the conversion of intellectuals into bureaucrats.

Political Malevolence and the Language of Subjugation: Crimes legitimized through softened terminology—“stability,” “counter-terrorism”—where cultural discourse becomes a mask for power.

Axis II: The Smart Security State and the Soft Engineering of Subjugation

From Coercive Security to Smart Security: The engineering of obedience in the age of data.

Symbolic Normalization: Recasting the Palestinian question as a depoliticized humanitarian file detached from its historical and political context.

Emotional and Digital Control: Technologies of subjugation and strategies of collective distraction.

Axis III: Elites Between Functionality and Alienation

The Decline of the Organic Intellectual: From Malek Bennabi and Mohammed Abed al-Jabri to the commodified “market intellectual.”

The Symbolic Function of Elites: Containment of critical discourse, commodification of positions, and the fabrication of a “framed elite.”

The Free Voice at the Margins: Marginalization of critical writings and the containment of youth within sanitized digital spaces.

Conclusion: Toward the Recovery of Meaning and the Emancipatory Role of Culture

Axis I: From an Emancipatory Project to a Mechanism of Symbolic Regulation.

I. Culture as a Human Horizon

The danger does not reside in the absence of culture but in its abduction and conversion into an apparatus of domination. The responsibility of the new generation of intellectuals, therefore, is to reclaim meaning, dismantle the idolatrous bond between the intellectual and the regime, and return to the foundational questions: Why do we write? For whom? And against whom?

The theme of “culture as a human horizon” can be examined through four essential dimensions—art, thought, religion, and language—each of which has historically provided a vital space for resistance and dignity across societies.

1. Art as a Space of Resistance and the Recovery of Dignity

Art has consistently functioned as a symbolic medium of resistance to domination and as an affirmation of human dignity, whether expressed through painting, theater, music, or poetry. It has been deployed to expose social, cultural, and colonial injustices, particularly by indigenous and marginalized communities. As Stephen Duncombe (2007, pp. 27–28) argues, “popular art”—whether visual, expressive, or mass-oriented—serves as a tool of political and symbolic empowerment, enabling marginalized groups to reshape social and political realities through symbolic practices that infiltrate dominant discourse without confronting it directly. By producing alternative symbols and forms of satirical resistance, popular art demonstrates a cultural power from below. While it may not directly topple regimes, it undermines their legitimacy by revealing that alternative meanings remain possible.

2. Thought as a Field for Confronting Oppression and Reclaiming Human Dignity

Philosophical and critical thought constitutes a vital instrument for liberation from dominant mental frameworks that perpetuate structures of control. Jacques Derrida, in his essay “The Ends of Man”, warns against the danger of reducing human dignity to closed technical or ideological frameworks. He contends that “thinking the ends of man is already a form of resistance against the reduction of human dignity to a merely technical or ideological frame; it is the opening of thought to the Other and to an infinite plurality” (Derrida, 1982, p. 112).

In times of political malevolence, regimes redefine the human being as a subject to be regulated and managed—reduced to an object controlled through security, media, or cultural apparatuses—rather than recognized as a free subject endowed with multiple possibilities. This reduction constitutes the very core of political malevolence. Hence the relevance of Derrida’s thought: it insists on keeping humanity open to plurality, difference, and uncertainty, thereby safeguarding dignity as a universal and irreducible value.

3. Religion as an Instrument of Liberation Rather than Mere Regulation

In the aftermath of the Gaza War, certain regimes reappropriated religious discourse to serve the project of political malevolence by confining the tragedy to its humanitarian dimension while severing it from its colonial roots. Obedience and neutrality were elevated into virtues sanctioned by religious legitimacy, while resistance was stripped of its ethical and historical grounding. In this way, the “engineering of subjugation” became manifest in the re-interpretation of the sacred—not as a horizon for holding power accountable, but as a language of the regime itself.

Historically, religious traditions and practices have often been mobilized as cultural resources of resistance, particularly in Latin America and Africa, where they became vital to sustaining identity and dignity in the face of coercive assimilation (Silverman & Ruggles, 2007, pp. 9–12).

This contemporary tension between religion as a tool of political legitimation and religion as a lever of emancipation reveals that the post-Gaza struggle is not confined to the battlefield or international institutions. It is also, fundamentally, a struggle over meaning—over who holds the authority to interpret the sacred and whether such interpretation produces subjugation or resistance.

4. Language as a Tool of Domination and Liberation

Within the architecture of “political evil,” domination does not stop at the control of land or resources; it also extends into the symbolic fields that shape collective consciousness, foremost among them language. Language is not merely a medium of communication but, as Susan Gal demonstrates, a contested space for justice and dignity. It can serve as an instrument of hegemony when a dominant language is imposed that excludes the symbols and meanings tied to a community’s identity and its history of struggle. Symbolic domination operates through the imposition of “neutral” vocabulary that drains issues of their emancipatory and historical dimensions. After the Gaza War, this was evident in the substitution of terms such as liberation and occupation with humanitarian labels like crisis and suffering—an attempt to depoliticize the cause and transform language into a vehicle of subjugation.

Conversely, a resistant current has mobilized language as a tool of liberation, reclaiming the lexicon of rights, sovereignty, and resistance, and rearticulating it within digital and cultural spaces as a means of countering symbolic colonization. In this sense, language emerges as a vital battlefield of meaning, where the discourse of “political evil,” seeking to domesticate consciousness, confronts the discourse of resistance that rebinds dignity to liberation (Gal, 1989, pp. 345–367).

The intersection of these dimensions—art, thought, religion, and language—creates what might be called a resistant human horizon. As Angelika Poferl insightfully argues, cultural practice in its plurality constitutes a universal dimension of dignity, one that resists exclusion and restores the human being as a morally active subject (Poferl, 2017, pp. 215–232).

Viewed through this lens, culture is not a rarefied or ornamental sphere but a site of struggle in which human consciousness of dignity and resistance is embodied through symbolic and semantic expression.

II. Functional Transformation

This transformation represents one of the most perilous intellectual and social shifts of the modern era. It is not merely a matter concerning intellectuals, but one that reverberates across the very structure of society, power, democracy, and public culture. A deeper analysis reveals the contours of this shift through multiple epistemic and historical lenses.

1. The Nature of Functional Transformation: From Critique to Justification

In an environment permeated by political evil, cultural elites become strategic targets for policies of containment and redeployment. As Zygmunt Bauman underscores, this transformation is not simply an individual deviation but rather a systematic process embedded within a bureaucracy of control. In this context, the pursuit of truth is replaced by the production of “convenient” narratives for power—narratives that justify repression, downplay the gravity of violations, or strip major events (such as the Gaza War) of their political context by recasting them as fragmented technical or humanitarian issues.

Within such a framework, the intellectual shifts from being a legislator of critical meaning to becoming an interpreter who legitimizes official narratives, thereby enhancing the capacity of power to exercise political evil under a cultural and academic veneer. Here, the engineering of submission intersects with the domestication of elites: the former targets the masses through media, religion, and language, while the latter disciplines intellectuals, transforming them from agents of resistance into instruments of legitimation (Bauman, 1987, pp. 8–10).

2. Historical Analysis: From Committed Intellectuals to Technocratic Intellectuals

The status of the intellectual underwent a profound structural shift during the twentieth century. Jean-Paul Sartre embodied the classical model of the committed intellectual, one who does not merely write or theorize but transforms cultural production into a political and ethical act of resistance against authority. In his work *What is Literature?*, Sartre emphasizes that the responsibility of the intellectual lies in aligning with struggles for liberation and justice, and in standing with the oppressed against structures of domination (Sartre, 1948, p. 2).

With the rise of neoliberalism, however, a new model emerged: the technocratic intellectual, described by Alvin Gouldner as one integrated into institutions of power as an expert or consultant, providing technical knowledge that legitimizes the system rather than questioning it. In this shift, the intellectual moves from a moral resister to a bureaucratic actor reproducing the existing legitimacy (Gouldner, 1979, pp. 28–32).

Thus, political evil absorbs elites through material incentives and social prestige, redefining cultural legitimacy so that only voices endorsing “official reforms” are accepted while dissenting voices are marginalized. This historical transformation—from an intellectual committed to changing the system to one focused merely on improving its administration—reflects the success of political evil in neutralizing intellectual forces, turning them from sites of resistance into subtle instruments for managing submission.

3. Transformation of the Intellectual–State Relationship: From Confrontation to Partnership

Noam Chomsky argues that the relationship between intellectuals and the state has undergone a radical transformation. Rather than serving as critics who expose the falsity of official discourse, many intellectuals have become embedded within decision-making networks, providing epistemic and moral legitimacy to state policies. In this shift, the intellectual’s role has moved from being the “conscience of the nation” to functioning as an “institutional partner,” thereby illustrating the success of political evil in converting critique into a mechanism for producing consensus (Chomsky, 1967, pp. 5–20).

4. Cultural Bureaucracy and the Taming of Meaning: From Social Legibility to Symbolic Domination and the Engineering of Collective Consciousness

According to James C. Scott in *Seeing Like a State*, bureaucracy extends far beyond its administrative and material domain to become an instrument for reshaping the symbolic order in line with the logic of the state. Through what he terms “legibility,” the state simplifies complex social phenomena and reconstitutes them into manageable categories, thereby determining what can be seen, said, and symbolized. In this process, cultural

bureaucracy functions as a mechanism that regulates symbols and meanings, reinforcing the state's image and consolidating its political project. This "symbolic simplification" erases plurality and reconstitutes culture within official molds that sustain legitimacy and hegemony (Scott, 1998, pp. 22–24).

Within this framework, Slavoj Žižek adds a further dimension by emphasizing that the absence of critical intellectuals reshapes not only the cultural or academic sphere but the very cognitive structures of society. Without an autonomous critical discourse, public culture degenerates into a hybrid of systematic propaganda that reproduces state narratives under the guise of neutrality or cultural expression, while in fact concealing a precise ideological agenda. Consequently, the disappearance of critical voices does not merely represent the loss of opposition but constitutes a mechanism that facilitates the re-engineering of collective consciousness, allowing dominant narratives to be presented as natural and self-evident, immune to intellectual resistance or social accountability (Žižek, 2008, p. 4).

This transformation weakens the capacity of collective awareness to unmask mechanisms of domination, rendering it more susceptible to official narratives and thereby perpetuating political evil through the generational reproduction of obedience.

6. From the Public Intellectual to the Market Intellectual

The shift from the figure of the public intellectual to what may be termed the market intellectual signifies the erosion of the ethical and epistemic autonomy that historically conferred legitimacy upon intellectuals. As Edward Said reminds us, the true intellectual is "not one who seeks to consolidate power but to question it; not one who joins the consensus but one who remains outside it if necessary" (Said, 1994, pp. 11–12). Yet the contemporary Arab cultural landscape reveals a different trajectory: many intellectuals now pursue the logic of the market, transforming into media celebrities or digital influencers who produce content aligned either with official discourse or with the imperatives of the media economy.

This transformation empties culture of its emancipatory dimension and reduces the intellectual from the "conscience of the nation" to a symbolic employee within the machinery of consumption and propaganda. Consequently, the intellectual becomes complicit in the reproduction of hegemony rather than its deconstruction, promoting narratives of "moderation" and "stability" favored by political regimes and media institutions at the expense of radical critique and commitment to justice.

Whereas the public intellectual was historically tied to truth and to the defense of marginalized voices, the market intellectual operates under the logic of supply and demand, with funding institutions dictating both agenda and visibility. The result is a cultural discourse stripped of its critical depth and recast as a consumable product—simplifying complex ideas to fit market needs. In this sense, the intellectual becomes an integral part of the cycle of symbolic production that legitimizes the status quo rather than interrogating it, thereby reinforcing the dynamics of political evil under the guise of cultural expression.

III. Political Evil and the Language of Submission

Political crimes are increasingly justified through soft terminology such as "stability" and "the fight against terrorism." Language here ceases to be a medium of communication and becomes a mechanism of distortion, legitimizing violations under anesthetizing concepts. Intellectual and cultural discourses, once associated with critique, are transformed into masks that grant regimes symbolic legitimacy. In doing so, they marginalize critical reason and restrict the horizons of emancipation, consolidating a new architecture of submission.

1. Political Evil: Not Only in Action but in Language

The notion of political evil must be distinguished from traditional moral conceptions of evil.

General Definition: Political evil can be understood as a systematic process whereby power employs law, institutions, and politics not to protect human life, but to produce symbolic and material violence. It normalizes oppression and even extermination under the guise of legal or moral legitimacy. This form of evil is enacted through bureaucratic administrations, security apparatuses, and discourses of religious or nationalist legitimacy, effectively hollowing out universal values such as justice, freedom, and dignity into empty slogans.

Hannah Arendt's Perspective: For Arendt, political evil manifests itself in its banality: individuals within the state machinery become mere executors of violence, stripped of moral awareness [Arendt, 1963: 288–290] .

In contrast, **Paul Ricoeur** identifies political evil in its institutional dimension, wherein law is transformed from a guarantor of justice into a tool for legitimizing injustice [Ricoeur, 1967: 348–352] .

Similarly, **Achille Mbembe** conceptualizes it through the framework of necropolitics, where sovereign power determines who may live and who can be abandoned to death [Mbembe, 2003: 11–12] .

In the Arab context, **Burhan Ghalioun** argues that political evil is manifested in the transformation of the state from a social contract into a disciplinary apparatus. Here, repression is justified in the name of “unity” or “stability” [Ghalioun, 1994: 112–115] .

Thus, political evil is not exercised as an individual deviation but as part of a systematic and institutionalized engineering carried out by states or regimes—often cloaked in the deceptive language of legality and morality.

Constitutive Elements of Political Evil

The concept of political evil rests on three interrelated pillars that illuminate its mechanisms of operation:

Dehumanization – the systematic stripping of individuals or groups of their human dignity, thereby making them expendable or disposable within the political order.

Legitimation of Violence in the Name of the State or Law – the use of legal, institutional, or ideological frameworks to justify coercion, repression, and even mass atrocities under the guise of protecting sovereignty, stability, or national unity.

Normalized Injustice – the routinization and normalization of systemic oppression, whereby repeated acts of domination and exclusion become embedded in everyday governance and are no longer perceived as exceptional violations but as part of the political “normal.”

Together, these elements illustrate how political evil transcends individual malice and becomes institutionalized within structures of power, law, and discourse.

Contemporary Illustrations of Political Evil

Context	Practice	Claimed Justification
War on Gaza	Bombing civilians, imposing starvation	Self-defense
Iraq War (2003)	Invasion and prolonged occupation	Spreading democracy
Arab Authoritarian Regimes	Arbitrary arrests, torture, systemic repression	Protecting the state from chaos
European Migration Policy	Allowing refugees to drown or mass detention camps	Safeguarding European borders

These cases demonstrate how **political evil disguises itself through legitimizing narratives** that cloak violence, dispossession, and systemic injustice under seemingly rational or ethical terms. The rhetorical masks of “security,” “democracy,” or “stability” serve not to reveal the truth but to **neutralize critique and normalize oppression**.

“Political evil” represents the most dangerous form of deviation, for it disguises itself in the guise of order, exercised in the name of the state and reinforced through the complicity of discourse.

Its deconstruction, therefore, cannot be reduced to moral preaching but requires **“unmasking the mechanisms of its symbolic legitimization and exposing the language that conceals violence under the rubric of security or patriotism.”**

Political evil does not reside solely in acts of killing, torture, and persecution; rather, it lies in the manner in which such acts are enveloped in a false “moral” vocabulary. As Hannah Arendt argues, the essence of the “banality of evil” rests in stripping it of critical awareness, rendering it routine, technical, and seemingly justified. For instance, in Nazi discourse, the term “Final Solution” functioned as a sanitized technical expression for genocide. In contemporary contexts, mass purges are often carried out under the pretext of “restoring order.”

2. Soft Terms, Hard Crimes: The Deception of Language

In contemporary contexts, political language is no longer merely a means of expression but has become an instrument of subtle domination. Terms such as “fighting terrorism,” “national stability,” and “legitimate

deterrence” are deployed to mask the reality of repression and to normalize violence. As David Lyon observes in *Surveillance Society*, security discourse is mobilized to legitimize exceptional policies, by reframing the very notions of protection and safety so that continuous surveillance and control appear justified [Lyon, 2018: pp. 42–44] .

A contemporary example would be the bombing of entire villages under the pretext of “draining the sources of terrorism” or the arrest of political dissidents within the framework of “emergency laws.”

3. Cultural Discourse as an Authoritarian Mask

In his critical reading of the relationship between power and knowledge, Michel Foucault demonstrates that cultural discourse is not merely a neutral artistic or intellectual expression but can be transformed into a strategic instrument for reproducing power and normalizing its structures within collective consciousness. When cultural and artistic institutions adopt the narratives of power, they do not simply reiterate its discourse; rather, they reframe it through aesthetic and symbolic forms that render it acceptable—indeed, even desirable—to the public [Foucault, 1980, pp. 131–133] .

Nick Couldry argues that contemporary cultural and media discourse has become an instrument of symbolic domination, in which meanings are rearticulated within what he terms the “infrastructure of meaning,” a mechanism that produces compliance and naturalizes control (Couldry, 2010, pp. 2–4). In this way, the “cultural mask” functions as a means of concealing repression behind symbolic and aesthetic façades. Art, media, and even academic research thus become instruments of regulation, constraining collective imagination and reproducing the boundaries of domination—as evidenced in dramas that legitimize security violence or embellish the image of the nationalist autocrat.

Edward Said further notes that the intellectual, seduced by influence or pressured by power structures, may shift from being a critic of authority to a collaborator in disseminating its discourse, thereby granting it symbolic and moral legitimacy [Said, 1994, pp. 19–27] . In this sense, abandoning the critical role amounts to active participation in producing a cultural mask that conceals repression and makes domination more palatable, as in the justification of authoritarianism under the banners of “gradual reform” or “cultural particularity.”

4. Language as an Institution: Engineering Public Opinion

Political language has been transformed into an institutionalized system for shaping public opinion, operating through state-controlled media, presidential speeches, and educational curricula. Noam Chomsky, in his seminal work *Manufacturing Consent*, demonstrates how popular acceptance of repressive policies is produced through elite control over linguistic narratives.

For example, the victims of war are reframed as “collateral damage,” while political opponents are recast as “traitors to the nation.”

5. Hollow Symbolism: When Words Lose Their Substance

In the realm of political evil, power is not always exercised through overt force but is often substituted with control over meaning. Here, Jean Baudrillard’s notion of “simulation” becomes central: grand human concepts—such as freedom, justice, democracy, or dignity—are emptied of their actual substance and repackaged in counterfeit linguistic forms that serve the interests of power.

In this sense, political evil manifests itself also in its linguistic dimension, producing slogans that conceal realities, transforming tragedies into neutral media spectacles, and rewriting history into narratives that glorify authority while conditioning the collective consciousness to accept falsehood as reality.

Political evil, then, does not merely dominate bodies or economies; it penetrates the very structure of language and meaning, redefining what counts as “good” and “evil” according to its own interests. This leaves citizens suspended in a state of perpetual ambiguity between truth and illusion [Baudrillard, 1994, pp. 1–7] .

For example,

- the term “stability” may, in practice, signify repression, monopoly, impoverishment, and the criminalization of dissent.

Axis Two: The Smart Security State and the Soft Engineering of Compliance

This axis continues the deconstruction of the system of “contemporary political evil,” but from a more precise perspective: the role of the “smart security state” in exercising “soft engineering of compliance” through emotional and cultural instruments rather than overt violence. Following the events of October 7, 2023, we have witnessed an acceleration in the deployment of these strategies, particularly in the Arab world and in the context of Israeli occupation.

I. From Coercive Security to Smart Security: Engineering Obedience in the Age of Data

The modern security state no longer relies primarily on direct repression. Instead, it has shifted toward a mode of “soft control,” grounded in the management of behavior and emotions through what Shoshana Zuboff terms “surveillance capitalism.” In this framework, individuals’ everyday data are extracted and processed into predictive patterns that allow for preemptive intervention in their actions. Control thus becomes invisible, permeating the details of daily life, and is exercised through smartphones, digital platforms, and intelligent systems rather than through traditional coercive instruments [Zuboff, 2019, pp. 93–111]

1. Mechanisms of Control in the Smart Security State

The smart security state relies on four fundamental mechanisms of symbolic regulation: **(a) the production of cultural narratives** that frame compliance as a virtue; **(b) the reprogramming of emotions** to redirect anger and empathy; **(c) the enforcement of self-censorship** through fear of isolation or the loss of privileges; and **(d) predictive intervention** by using data to enable preemptive action.

Following the Gaza war (October 7), these mechanisms were clearly manifested in the suppression of digital solidarity, the transformation of symbols of resistance into icons of victimhood that strip popular anger of its political content, and the mobilization of social media influencers as a soft façade for engineering public opinion. This model of the security state does not abolish coercive instruments but relegates them to the status of “last resort,” while ensuring that the majority of compliance is achieved by persuading individuals to internalize control as a natural part of their everyday lives.

Example:

- the promotion of self-monitoring applications that track “national loyalty” and monitor emotional.

2- Regulating Emotions through Emotional Media

After October 7, the authority within the structure of political evil concentrated on engineering collective emotions through two complementary trajectories: first, criminalizing emotional expression by transforming solidarity or anger into a security threat that enforces self-censorship; and second, redirecting emotions through carefully designed emotional content that diverts feelings away from criticizing authority and re-channels them in support of its official narrative. This aligns with Noam Chomsky’s concept of “manufacturing consent,” where public opinion is managed not only through information, but also through controlling the affective frames that shape how such information is received and utilized [Altheide, 2006] .

Example:

- Broadcasting videos of children crying on the frontlines to justify silence over massacres, or to reduce public pressure arising from solidarity with Gaza.

3- The Use of Religion to Freeze Popular Anger

This mode of “religious neutralization”, as described by Talal Asad, illustrates how political evil can appropriate sacred references not to promote justice or resist oppression, but to pacify collective emotions and suspend the possibilities of action [Asad, 2003, pp. 199–200] . The authority re-engineers religious discourse, shifting it from a platform of liberation and demands for dignity into a tool for legitimizing silence and acceptance of the status quo. Popular anger is reframed within the ethics of obedience, presented not as a legitimate political right but as a threat to unity or faith. Thus, the critical function of religion is annulled in favor of a hegemonic function that provides spiritual legitimacy resistant to contestation. These mechanisms intersect with Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony, whereby symbolic structures (religion, education, media) are mobilized to dominate not only actions but also what is deemed moral and virtuous [Silverman & Ruggles, 2007, p. 15] .

Example:

- Friday sermons that justify official positions as “preventing discord” while warning against the “exploitation of religion in politics.”

4- Influencers, Algorithms, and Emotional Engineering: Instruments of Soft Steering

After October 7, certain Gulf and Arab regimes resorted to digital influencers to produce what can be described as a form of “soft emotional hegemony”, in which the official narrative is repackaged into entertaining and sentimental formats that facilitate its diffusion. Through this process, the militant dimension of political struggles is emptied out and replaced by an artificial consensus built upon symbols and emotional repetition. This strategy, as Foucault notes in the framework of “perception management”, does not rely on outright prohibition, but rather on shaping a discursive environment that renders the authority’s narrative the “natural” option (Foucault).

During the Gaza War (2023–2024), algorithmic perception management emerged as a new mechanism of domination. Platforms did not merely censor content; they actively reconfigured the discursive space by privileging neutral or entertainment-oriented material while amplifying the discourse of “stability.” This aligns

with Foucault's vision of controlled discursive environments and with Noble's analysis of algorithms as instruments for producing hegemonic knowledge that reorganizes truth in the service of power [Noble, 2018, pp. 23–26] .

Examples include “awareness” videos by influencers portraying events as mere “differences of opinion” or “mutual suffering,” criminalizing moral alignment and stripping the conflict of its political essence. In this context, social media platforms after October 7 shifted from spaces of debate into instruments of hidden domination, suppressing solidarity hashtags and banning critical accounts, with algorithms functioning as an “invisible policeman” reshaping collective perception.

Moreover, the emotional engineering of the Palestinian cause reframed the liberation narrative as a purely humanitarian crisis. The victim was recast not as a symbol of resistance but as a helpless petitioner for sympathy, while resistance itself was demonized and blamed for the tragedy. This inversion allowed the oppressor to appear as self-defending and the victims as responsible for their own suffering. Such a moral reversal embodies the model developed by Herman and Chomsky in “Manufacturing Consent”, whereby public sentiment is redirected to legitimize hegemonic power [Herman & Chomsky, 1988, pp. xi–xv] .

II. Symbolic Normalization: Transforming the Palestinian Cause into a Depoliticized Humanitarian Issue

This section examines how official, cultural, and media discourse has enacted a form of soft normalization of the Palestinian cause, what can be termed “humanitarian abstraction stripped of politics.” The cause has not been buried; rather, it has been reproduced as a “recurring human tragedy” rather than a struggle for “liberation and resistance to occupation.”

1. Erasing History... Freezing Politics

One of the most prominent features of controlling the Palestinian narrative after October 7 is the combination of “emptying the event of its historical context” and “reframing it emotionally.” This process begins with “erasing history”—removing the roots of the Palestinian struggle that extend from the Nakba of 1948, through the occupation of 1967, to the Gaza catastrophe of 2023—reducing everything to a single, immediate moment of suffering. This temporal fragmentation serves to depict ongoing events as merely “another round of violence between two sides,” rather than as part of a long-standing settler-colonial project.

Emotional engineering transforms the Palestinian cause from a liberation struggle into an isolated humanitarian crisis, addressed through relief rather than resistance. Symbols of resistance are reframed as victims, and anger is replaced by pity, equating oppressor and oppressed. Consequently, public consciousness is reshaped to keep Palestinians in the position of perpetual victims rather than political actors, reinforcing the persistence of the status quo.

Rashid Khalidi in *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine* emphasizes that ignoring the historical dimension of the Palestinian cause is a tool of symbolic normalization, as the conflict is reduced to instantaneous images of victims and presented as a “humanitarian crisis” rather than a long-term colonial project. Following the Gaza war of 2023, this manifested in neutral media and international discourse that equated victims and perpetrators, enacting normalization through historical erasure that legitimizes ongoing colonization under the guise of international legitimacy [Khalidi, 2020, pp. 12–15] .

Examples:

- Referring to the events in Gaza 2023 as the “Israeli-Hamas war” rather than an “assault on a besieged population.”
- Omitting references to the occupation in UN reports or official statements of certain states.

2- The Role of International and Arab Media in Reframing Meaning

Media outlets reshape major crimes within a framework of “neutralized empathy,” highlighting images of victims and tragic scenes while erasing the political and historical context. Consequently, the question shifts from “Why did this happen?” to “How many victims are there?”—reducing the tragedy to numbers and emotional images, while the responsible political and military actors are omitted. The result is a false emotional engagement that conceals the colonial structure and the logic of extermination.

In the case of Gaza after October 7, this media pattern led to an implicit equalization between aggressor and victim, presenting both sides as “victims of violence” while avoiding naming the occupation or holding it

directly accountable. This form of selective humanity does not expose the crime but contributes to “whitewashing” it, portraying it as a natural tragedy or an intractable, eternal conflict—aligning with political domination strategies that aim to keep public consciousness trapped in passive emotion rather than resistant action.

Christian Fuchs discusses how digital media recasts Middle Eastern issues—including Palestine—as “humanitarian crises” rather than as colonial-political contexts. He notes that this de-politicized “humanitarian” framing serves to normalize the status quo by displacing structural and political analysis, portraying Western media coverage of Middle Eastern violence as a “relief crisis” rather than a matter of political justice [Fuchs, 2021] .

Examples:

- Language such as “violence erupted” without specifying who initiated the bombing or siege.
- Using only images of children and tragedies without linking them to colonial policies.
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3- Human Rights Bureaucracy as a Tool of Symbolic Normalization

The legal dimension as a mechanism of symbolic control after October 7 reveals how international law and human rights organizations’ discourse can become instruments for reproducing a false equality between victim and perpetrator. By employing formulations such as “all parties must exercise restraint,” the structural difference between aggressor and victim is erased, and systematic violence is reduced to a mere “mutual conflict,” thereby legitimizing the status quo rather than holding it accountable [Butler, 2009, pp. 73–77] .

Noura Erakat emphasizes that international law does not always function as a tool of liberation; it may instead freeze conflicts by channeling justice into slow bureaucratic processes that strip tragedies of their political and ethical dimensions, reducing them to legal files and statistics. This is evident when comparing the rapid legal response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine (2022), in which international and criminal courts acted swiftly, with the extreme delays in addressing the atrocities in Gaza (2023), where prolonged procedural formalities allowed massacres to continue. Such delays weaken moral urgency and shift the debate from the political to the legal realm, reducing the liberation of peoples to a legal dispute between “two equal sides.” Consequently, human rights and legal instruments become part of the mechanisms of the “smart security state,” which relies not solely on direct coercion but also reproduces compliance through tools that appear neutral and humanitarian.

Example:

- Fundraising appeals by major organizations describing bombings as an “environmental and health disaster” without identifying the perpetrator.

4- Transforming Symbols into Empty Decor

One of the most insidious mechanisms for depoliticizing the Palestinian cause lies in converting its struggle symbols—such as the keffiyeh, the keys of return, and the map of Palestine—from tools of political mobilization into commodified folkloric elements used in festivals and advertisements as aesthetic heritage stripped of meaning. In this process, these symbols are deprived of their mobilizing power and reframed within the logic of authority as “safe solidarity” that neither challenges normalization discourse nor alters the essence of the conflict. Authors Poell, Nieborg, and van Dijck illustrate how political symbols and slogans, when transferred to platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, are transformed into hashtags and shareable images subject to the rules of **algorithms and the attention economy**.

As a result, even the most potent symbols of resistance can be reduced to digital decor or a temporary trend, emptied of their historical and political roots

III- Emotional and Digital Control: Technologies of Compliance and Strategies of Mass Distraction

In contemporary Arab regimes, symbolic control no longer relies solely on managing ideas or producing official discourse; it has evolved into a complex combination of “emotional engineering” and “digital management of collective behavior.”

1. Emotional Engineering: From Justified Anger to Rationalized Pity

Emotional engineering is not merely “playing on the strings of sentiment,” but a comprehensive political technology designed to manage mass affect, particularly during moments of major crises. After October 7, this mechanism became highly pronounced in Arab and international media through sequential steps.

Issues are reduced to a depoliticized humanitarian framework, where anger and critical awareness are replaced by fleeting pity, generating emotional fatigue that encourages public disengagement. Algorithms regulate emotional exposure by amplifying “safe” content and suppressing material that might provoke protest

consciousness. Simultaneously, the portrayal of actors is reshaped: resistance is delegitimized and regimes are polished, solidifying normalization alongside helplessness, making symbolic solidarity a substitute for effective political action.

2. Digital Management of Behavior

Digital management of behavior represents one of the most advanced forms of symbolic control in the smart security state. It does not merely delete opposing content or shut down influential accounts; rather, it constructs an entirely new cognitive and emotional environment. Through algorithms, real-time maps of public opinion are generated, influence points are identified, and information flows are intervened upon to serve the political agenda. This intervention takes **two integrated forms**:

a. Overt Surveillance: Hashtags associated with solidarity are blocked, access to “sensitive” content is restricted, and pages or accounts capable of mobilizing public opinion are shut down.

b. Covert Engineering: Content promoting “rationality” and “stability” is amplified, peripheral issues are highlighted to divert discourse from the core of the conflict, and alternative discussion waves are generated to absorb public anger.

In this manner, the digital space becomes a “synchronized arena of surveillance and guidance,” where users perceive relative freedom, yet are in reality surrounded by an invisible framework that dictates what they see and do not see, what captures their attention and what is ignored—thereby reproducing compliance under the guise of “personal choice.”

3. Strategies of Mass Distraction

Strategies of mass distraction represent the practical extension of emotional engineering and digital management of behavior. They target not only the suppression or redirection of consciousness but also its inundation with successive waves of noise and emptied content. These strategies operate on **two integrated levels**:

Distraction and symbolic normalization are employed to weaken political awareness. On one hand, digital spaces are flooded with entertainment content and marginal debates, occupying the mind and diverting discourse from core issues. On the other hand, official narratives are recycled through influencers in light, friendly formats, lending emotional legitimacy to the official story and making its adoption appear natural and unquestioned. The result is not the complete absence of political consciousness, but its reshaping into a confused and consumable awareness, incapable of forming coherent protest action due to its exhaustion in continuous waves of distraction.

Axis Three: Elites between Functionalism and Alienation

I. The Decline of the Organic Intellectual: From Ben Nabhī and al-Jābirī to the Market Intellectual

The decline of the organic intellectual indicates the transformation of Arab culture from committed thought to symbolic commodification, where the role of the intellectual engaged in social and political struggle—as exemplified by Malik Ben Nabhī and Mohammed Abed al-Jābirī—has receded in favor of cultural patterns detached from the project of liberation.

1. From the Organic Intellectual to the Functional (Market) Intellectual

According to Gramsci, the organic intellectual is one who engages in social and political struggle, expresses the aspirations of oppressed groups, and works to shape a resistant collective consciousness. This model was embodied in the Arab context by figures such as:

a. Malik Ben Nabhī: who analyzed the concept of “colonizability” as a self-imposed condition that must be overcome to liberate political will.

Here, the intellectual bears a major responsibility: to dismantle this colonizability by constructing a new civilizational consciousness, rather than merely blaming the colonizer **【Ben Nabhī, 2002, pp. 84–90】** .

Relevance in our context:

Ben Nabhī’s framework directly resonates with critiques of “emotional engineering” and “symbolic normalization”, since colonizability in our era takes new forms: “susceptibility to normalization” and “susceptibility to emotional pacification”, exercised through media and digital control.

b. Mohammed Abed al-Jābirī: who proposed a critical project for Arab reason, linking intellectual liberation to social and political renaissance **【Al-Jābirī, 1990, pp. 327–334】** .

Relevance in the post-October 7 context:

Al-Jābirī provides tools to analyze how symbolic normalization and emotional engineering operate not only through media and politics but also via cognitive frameworks that reproduce themselves while excluding critical alternatives.

He emphasizes that confronting political evil requires dismantling the intellectual systems that legitimize it, rather than merely condemning its manifestations.

Following the events of October 7, 2023, and the Gaza war, the Arab intellectual landscape witnessed the rise of the “functional intellectual” model, whose discourse is woven within the limits of authority, employing language of “neutrality” or “balance” that equates victim and oppressor, thereby implicitly reinforcing the official narrative. Concurrently, over the last two decades, the presence of the “market intellectual” has strengthened—whose logic is governed by supply and demand, writing according to popular expectations to gain visibility and fame, rather than stemming from principled commitment or political and social responsibility.

Characteristics:

The market intellectual is characterized by alignment with prevailing trends to avoid confrontation, employing moderated language that eschews radicalism, and transforming ideas into rapidly consumable products marketed to the public. They often present themselves as a “brand” that caters to platform demands and aligns with emotional engineering by producing content that pacifies emotions rather than mobilizing them. Additionally, they participate in symbolic normalization discourse through slogans of moderation and balance that obscure the essence of the conflict. Thus, they become an instrument for reproducing hegemony through a light consumerist culture, in stark contrast with Gramsci’s model of the organic intellectual.

c. Features of the New Model

Feature	Organic Intellectual	Market Intellectual
Stance toward authority	Critical, independent	Justifying, conciliatory
Intellectual reference	Collective liberatory project	Individualistic, consumerist
Target audience	Marginalized social classes	Consumer-oriented public
Presence	Seminars, universities, books	Television, YouTube, social media

This table highlights the contrasting positions of the two models. While the organic intellectual engages critically with authority and prioritizes collective emancipation, the market intellectual aligns with prevailing norms, prioritizes personal visibility, and addresses a consumerist audience. This shift illustrates the transformation of the Arab intellectual landscape under the pressures of symbolic normalization, emotional engineering, and the digital media environment.

2. Toward the Restoration of Genuine Cultural Action

The decline of the organic intellectual is not an inevitable fate but rather the outcome of symbolic engineering by both authority and the market, reinforced by digital platforms that redefine the intellectual’s role. However, restoring this critical function remains possible through the creation of independent intellectual networks, the use of new media to produce critical content, the revitalization of universities and scholarly journals, and support for decentralized, non-governmental research projects.

In this section, we analyze how the intellectual and cultural elite in the Arab world has transformed into an entity “detached from society” and “subservient to authority or the market,” resulting in a loss of symbolic legitimacy and alienation from its organic role in analysis, guidance, and critique.

3. Between Loyalty to Authority and Popular Marginalization

Elites who align closely with authority become socially suspect, being perceived as instruments of justification rather than accountability, while those who distance themselves are marginalized or neglected.

Vincent Dubois discusses how, under the transformations of neoliberalism and institutional culture, the intellectual increasingly functions as an employee within the state apparatus, losing critical independence in favor of “bureaucratic legitimacy” or “market legitimacy.” He emphasizes that the intellectual who avoids confrontation with authority or the market is transformed into a symbolic instrument, stripped of the critical condition that grants legitimacy [Dubois, 2015, pp. 102–105] .

Examples:

- Academics who become unofficial spokespeople for regimes.
- Thinkers writing in “methodologically rigorous” language without any societal impact

4. Loss of Ethical and Cultural Reference

Many cultural elites today experience an unannounced “moral collapse” through silent complicity with repression or neutrality on just causes, where “neutrality” becomes a virtue.

Jacques Rancière, in his book *The Politics of Aesthetics*, describes what he calls the “silencing of politics within cultural discourse,” where culture is reduced to the management of symbolic appearances rather than serving as a space for struggle and the dismantling of domination [Rancière, 2004, pp. 12–13]. This phenomenon is evident in the contemporary Arab context, where large segments of the cultural elite function symbolically to produce consensus and justify the “status quo,” instead of performing the role of the critical intellectual who redistributes perception and exposes the contradictions of power.

In this sense, the intellectual becomes a partner in political evil, granting symbolic legitimacy to power structures and transforming culture from a horizon of resistance into a tool of normalization.

Example:

- Senior thinkers justifying normalization or remaining silent on the Gaza massacres under the pretext of “political pragmatism” or “the need to read reality.”

5. The Intellectual Between Two Capitals: Symbolic and Economic

The market also exerts pressures on the intellectual: either to comply with the “rules of dissemination” (cultural populism) or to be excluded from the circles of “cultural funding” and major institutions.

Slavoj Žižek notes that “the funded intellectual falls into self-repetition: analyzing the market while being subject to it” [Žižek, 2012, p. 134].

II. The Symbolic Function of Elites: Containing Critical Discourse, Commodifying Positions, and Creating a "Framed Elite"

1. What is meant by the “symbolic function” of the elite?

a. The concept of symbolic alienation of the elite: It refers to the intellectual or thinker being disconnected from:

- The social field they claim to represent.
- The political field within which they operate.
- The symbolic field that once granted them “cultural prestige” and “moral authority.”

Pierre Bourdieu likens this condition to the loss of symbolic position resulting from the inflation of economic or political capital. He emphasizes that when an intellectual enters the market game or becomes subordinated to power, they lose their distinctive symbolic capital—i.e., the ability to impose legitimacy and meaning within the cultural field—becoming merely an element in the network of economic and political domination, a process he terms “the fracture of the intellectual’s capital” [Bourdieu, 1996, pp. 142–146].

The symbolic function of the elite is not limited to knowledge production; it encompasses the “manufacturing of legitimacy and cultural hegemony.” The elite is not merely a cognitive component but a means to:

Legitimize the discourse of power.

Justify the status quo.

Contain opposing voices under the guise of “moderation” or “rationality” [Gramsci, 2023, pp. 153–155].

B- Consequences of Symbolic Alienation.

Consequence	Description
Loss of ethical legitimacy	Society no longer regards the elite as a genuine moral or intellectual reference
Loss of political influence	Decision-makers no longer view intellectuals as necessary for shaping public policy
Commodification or symbolic retirement	Either instrumentalized during seasonal events, or entirely forgotten

2- Mechanisms of Containing Critical Discourse

Instead of confronting critical discourse solely through repression, authority or the market resorts to “symbolic containment” by means of soft strategies:

Containment Mechanism	Description
Discursive inclusion	Incorporating critical voices into symbolic events without any real impact (forums, awards, etc.)
Institutional co-optation	Recruiting critical intellectuals into official institutions in order to neutralize them
Discursive assimilation	Using their concepts in ways emptied of substance (e.g., justice, freedom, change...)
Reinterpretation	Framing critical discourse as “protest literature” rather than as a clear political or cultural program

Analytical Note:

These mechanisms do not silence critical voices outright; rather, they domesticate them by stripping their transformative potential. By shifting criticism into safe, symbolic, or institutionalized frameworks, power preserves its legitimacy, while dissent is neutralized and rebranded as harmless cultural capital.

Examples (Arab Context):

- The figure of the Arab intellectual, often celebrated for his critical discourse on democracy, is strategically co-opted through repeated invitations to official media. Within these pre-set boundaries, his once-subversive voice is neutralized and reframed as ornamental critique, serving not to challenge but to reinforce the regime’s symbolic legitimacy.
- Similarly, universities and research centers that host conferences on “freedom of expression” or “transitional justice” under the patronage of ministries or security bodies exemplify how critical discourse is permitted only as spectacle. This managed form of critique is tolerated precisely because it lacks the potential to translate into concrete political or social transformation.
- In the aftermath of the Gaza war (2023), the promotion of certain intellectuals as “rational voices” in Arab media illustrates another dimension of symbolic co-optation. By equating victims and perpetrators under the rhetoric of “neutrality” or “balance,” such voices participate in reproducing the logic of symbolic normalization, blurring moral clarity and depoliticizing injustice.

3- The Disconnection between Intellectuals and Society – Elitist Discourse, Rarefied Language, and the Absence of Genuine Engagement

A- The Making of a “Framed Elite”:

The framed elite is one that:

- Does not embarrass the authorities.
- Does not threaten the market.
- Does not truly grapple with questions of change but instead offers “safe criticism” within the boundaries of cultural legitimacy.

As Burhan Ghalyoun observes, many Arab elites have been reduced to mere “intermediaries” for power, granted platforms and academic or media positions only because they remain within pre-drawn limits. If, as Herbert Marcuse argued, the “framed elite” in Western societies was the product of repressive tolerance [Marcuse, 1965], then in *The Assassination of the Mind*, [Ghalyoun 2006, pp. 211–214] shows how Arab elites played the same role: safe critique that neither embarrasses the state nor threatens the market, but functions instead as cultural décor lending legitimacy to the status quo.

Key Features:

- Domesticated elites who speak of change in the very language of the regime.
- Permanent visibility in the public sphere but without any real impact on transformation.
- Claiming to speak on behalf of “society” while avoiding genuine interaction with it.

B- Manifestations of Elitist Discourse

The closed academic mode: writing confined to scholarly reviews in highly technical language that excludes the ordinary reader.

Absence from popular arenas: scarce presence of intellectuals in mosques, public universities, unions, neighborhoods, or even active digital platforms.

Preoccupation with abstract issues: prioritizing rarefied theoretical or philosophical frameworks without translating them into pressing concerns such as poverty, repression, occupation, unemployment, or education. 【The Role of the Intellectuals in Historical Transformations, 2017】 .

4. Elitist Language... and the Power of Discourse

The intellectual often produces a language imbued with an implicit “assumption of symbolic superiority,” distancing them from genuinely addressing society. This language can become a barrier when wrapped in heavy academic terminology or borrowed literally from Western schools of thought, creating a condition of “discursive estrangement.” In this case, the intellectual ends up speaking in a language comprehensible only to their peers, while the broader public remains excluded from the circle of influence.

Abdallah Laroui argues that the cultural alienation of the Arab intellectual is manifested in their detachment from the shared language of the people. When the intellectual borrows a language saturated with Western concepts without re-articulating them within a local horizon, they perpetuate a gap between themselves and society. According to Laroui, this gap is not merely formal but generates a crisis of trust: the intellectual speaks a language that is not understood, thereby losing the symbolic legitimacy that once allowed them to play a critical and mobilizing role.

This estrangement turns the intellectual—consciously or unconsciously—into part of the mechanisms of symbolic control exercised by power:

- Instead of serving as a mediator between knowledge and the public, they become an isolated voice in a closed academic space.
- Weak communication opens the way for the discourse of power to become the “comprehensible” and “dominant” discourse.
- This is where Laroui situates the “crisis of the intellectual,” namely the collapse of their historical function as a critical and transformative voice. 【Al-‘Arwi, 1994, pp. 80–83】 .

Examples:

- The use of obscure concepts without simplification: “semiotic deconstruction,” “liquid modernity,” “interpretive frameworks”...
- Marginalization of clear Arabic in discourses directed toward public opinion.
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5. The Absence of Genuine Engagement with the People:

The lack of real engagement with the public has caused the cultural elite to become detached from the struggles and just causes of society. Superficial communication and media appearances have overshadowed the development of visions rooted in social realities or meaningful interaction with movements and unions. This vacuum has allowed alternative, more populist and less profound discourses to dominate the public sphere and reshape the priorities of debate 【Saïd, 2017, p. 112】 .

6. Outcomes: The Erosion of the Elite’s Symbolic Role

This trajectory has led to a profound erosion of the symbolic role of cultural elites on several levels. Their abstract and inaccessible discourse, framed in elitist language, has alienated society from serious intellectual engagement, rendering such thought irrelevant to people’s lived realities. Furthermore, the neglect of concrete issues—such as unemployment, poverty, civil liberties, and social justice—has contributed to a gradual decline in public trust, as intellectuals appear confined to ivory towers detached from everyday struggles. The absence of genuine interaction with the wider public has, in turn, created a vacuum in the public sphere, one that has been swiftly occupied by alternative discourses—media-driven, populist, or religious—that resonate more directly with the masses and reshape the priorities of public debate. In this way, traditional elites have forfeited much of their symbolic and directive authority.

7. The Representation of Elites by Power and Their Symbolic Utilization within the Official Cultural System

This section examines the complex relationship between cultural elites and political authority, where a segment of intellectuals is transformed into symbolic instruments used to reinforce the legitimacy of the regime, granting it a “progressive” or “enlightened” façade—even when the system itself remains authoritarian or repressive.

a. The Symbolic Representation of Elites within the Authoritarian Apparatus

The state does not suffice with silencing dissenting intellectuals; it also fabricates alternative ones whose discourse is domesticated, stripped of revolutionary substance, and displayed in formal symposia and festivals. As Hammoudi explains, within the makhzen system, the relationship between intellectuals and power is based on domestication and co-optation, whereby the regime-friendly intellectual becomes an “enlightened voice on demand,” granting symbolic legitimacy when required, only to be marginalized once their usefulness fades. In this way, the intellectual is reduced to an agent of legitimation rather than a critical force, echoing Gramsci’s distinction between the “traditional” (subordinate) intellectual and the “organic” intellectual [Hammoudi, 2010, pp. 152–158] .

b. Instruments of the Symbolic Co-optation of Intellectuals

- **Official Awards:** Rewarding compliant intellectuals and granting them cultural capital as a badge of merit.
- **Conferences and Symposia:** Recycling discourse within institutionally safe spaces.
- **Cultural Advisory Bodies:** Involving intellectuals in symbolic decision-making without granting actual influence.
- **Official Media Discourse:** Showcasing domesticated intellectuals as “moderates” while demonizing dissenting voices.

Pierre Bourdieu refers to this as symbolic domestication—the process of granting symbolic capital (recognition, status, legitimacy) in exchange for the surrender of independence. Power, as Bourdieu stresses, does not rely solely on coercion but also on this subtle domestication, which integrates intellectuals into the mechanisms of reproducing domination. By accepting this bargain, the intellectual forfeits their critical role and becomes a “broker of legitimacy” rather than a producer of emancipatory knowledge (Bourdieu, 1991, pp. 163–170).

c. The Fabrication of “Functional” Elites Representing the State Rather than Society

In this logic, intellectuals are summoned to the public sphere not as critics but as “experts” or “interpreters” of what the state wants society to believe. They are tasked with:

- Justifying securitarian discourse (e.g., the “necessity of stability”).
- Legitimizing normalization or rapprochement with occupation forces.
- Reframing resistance within the boundaries of “intellectual revisionism.”

In his early writings, Edward Said underscores that **the intellectual loses their critical vocation** once they dissolve into large political or academic institutions, becoming an **instrument within the apparatus of power** rather than an independent witness against it. He warns that this slide often occurs through the seduction of prestige and influence, leading the intellectual to believe they are practicing critique while, in reality, they are legitimizing the very system they ought to question [Said, 1994, pp. 19–23] .

III. The Free Voice on the Margins: Marginalizing Critical Writings and Containing Youth in Sanitized Digital Spaces

This section analyzes how the “serious critical voice” has been relegated to the margins in the context of the rise of new media, and how young people have been intellectually and digitally contained within “sanitized spaces” that encourage triviality and isolation rather than engagement.

1. The Marginalization of Critical Writing: From Publishing to Symbolic Banning

a. The Absence of Genuine Channels for Critical Publishing:

- The disappearance or chronic underfunding of independent intellectual journals.
- The rejection of manuscripts with sharp or non-market-friendly discourse by publishing houses.
- Subtle repression through “blacklists,” preemptive censorship, or undeclared restrictions [Qarawi, 2019, pp. 135–138] .

b. The Exclusion of Critical Discourse from Media Coverage:

- Invited onto media platforms only under tightly controlled frames or as part of token “balance.”
- Framed as excessively pessimistic or “irresponsible.”
- Undermined through narratives of false optimism or “toxic positivity.”

2. Youth in Sanitized Digital Spaces: From Liberation to Re-Regulation

Initially, social media platforms offered young people an alternative and open space, but they were quickly brought under control through mechanisms such as:

Direct Consequence	Phenomenon
Public alienation from serious intellectual engagement	Elitist and incomprehensible discourse
Erosion of public trust in the intellectual elite	Neglect of everyday issues

Rise of alternative populist, media-driven, or religious discourses filling the cultural void	Lack of interaction with the public
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3. The Symbolism of the “Free Voice” on the Margins

In the Arab context, critical voices are less often silenced directly than marginalized through neglect and distraction, a process Foucault calls “exclusion through disregard.” The Gaza War (2023–2024) revealed both soft tactics—such as drowning dissent in entertainment and limiting digital visibility—and harsher measures including imprisonment and enforced disappearance. This reflects a broader strategy of controlling the “visible and audible,” leaving the free voice confined between erasure and trivialization [Foucault, 1980, p. 82] .

4. The Crisis of the Digital Generation: Between Fragmented Awareness and Entertainment Containment

Contemporary youth face a dual crisis: possessing powerful digital tools of expression while lacking a critical public sphere that translates them into impactful action. Their critical energies are domesticated through media and culture, as discourse is emptied of substance and redirected toward entertainment consumption. The result is a fragmented awareness—digitally present yet devoid of effectiveness and organization—due to the absence of institutional listening. Consequently, youth expression remains an isolated energy, symbolically contained within patterns of consumption. [Dialmy, 2017, pp. 45, 134, 189] .

5. From the Margin to Repositioning: Pathways of Symbolic Resistance

- Creating alternative publishing spaces outside state licenses and official authorizations.
- Encouraging youth intellectual circles to write and theorize without waiting for institutional legitimacy.
- Exposing mechanisms of digital containment by unveiling the nexus between algorithms, markets, and politics.
- Valuing marginal awareness as a foundation for building long-term symbolic resistance. [Giroux, 2014] .

Conclusion

This study has sought to deconstruct the symbolic dynamics of the crisis of Arab cultural elites amid contemporary political and media transformations. From the **elitist language** that has deepened the gap with society, to the **co-optation of intellectuals by state power** as symbolic tools of legitimacy, through the **marginalization of critical writings** and the reconfiguration of youth consciousness within sanitized digital spaces, leading ultimately to the **erosion of the intellectuals’ symbolic role**—all these phenomena demonstrate that culture has not always remained a horizon of emancipation but has often been transformed into an instrument of subjugation.

The **Gaza War (after October 7, 2023)** has laid bare this predicament, exposing the fragility of meaning and stripping away ethical slogans under the weight of bloodshed. What emerges is a form of “**soft political evil**”, which disguises itself behind terms such as “stability” and “de-escalation,” while deploying cultural elites in performative roles that justify paralysis rather than awaken conscience.

Yet, the margins continue to harbor possibilities of **symbolic resistance**—through the creation of **alternative publishing and expression spaces**, the mobilization of **critical youth collectives** writing beyond the authority of state and market, and the unveiling of digital and discursive mechanisms of containment. These initiatives may not achieve immediate breakthroughs, but they lay the groundwork for a **memory of resistance** and a **liberatory imagination**, both of which are indispensable for any future horizon that seeks to reclaim culture as a critical force and a tool of human emancipation.

Ultimately, the study concludes that the struggle over culture is no longer merely a battle of margins or means of expression, but a struggle over **meaning itself**: will culture remain a mechanism for reproducing domination, or will it become a space of resistance that opens the path toward an alternative human horizon?

Strategic Recommendations

1- Dismantling the Symbolic Nexus between Culture and Power:

A critical imperative lies in uncovering the mechanisms of domestication and co-optation that transform intellectuals into “functional” rather than critical agents. This requires a systematic deconstruction of official discourses that subsume culture within their structures to legitimize themselves as rational or progressive.

2- Reclaiming Culture as a Horizon of Resistance:

There is a need to broaden the critical sphere by fostering independent intellectual production and developing alternative publishing spaces—both digital and physical—that enable marginalized intellectuals to reassert their agency. This should be accompanied by the establishment of collective initiatives that are autonomous in both epistemic orientation and financial resources.

3- Liberating Core Concepts from Authoritarian Appropriation:

Central notions such as “moderation,” “national interest,” and “responsibility” require reframing, as they are frequently instrumentalized to normalize subtle repression and constrain autonomous positions. These concepts ought instead to serve as emancipatory frameworks rather than as tools of control.

4- Reconceptualizing the Organic Intellectual in Light of New Modalities:

The contemporary organic intellectual transcends the confines of academic writing and formal conferences, emerging instead through the capacity to exert symbolic influence within digital platforms and social networks. In this role, the intellectual functions as a mediator between knowledge and society, thereby contributing to the restoration of public trust.

5- Adopting an Ethical Critique of Global Discourse:

It is crucial to expose the symbolic complicity of global elites who legitimized acts of genocide in Gaza through a pseudo-humanistic rhetoric. Ethical critique thus becomes a necessary instrument for confronting forms of “soft political evil,” while restoring culture to its rightful role as a liberating force rather than a decorative extension of hegemonic power.

Foresight Perspective.

Resistance to hegemony today cannot be reduced to armed struggle alone; it also unfolds through language, concepts, and symbols. In an era where elites are transformed into brands and positions into consumable content, liberation from this entrapment depends on reclaiming the human function of culture: to illuminate, to disrupt, and to emancipate.

The tragedy of Gaza has revealed that the ethical stance is no longer a theoretical luxury but a condition of existence itself, defining the very meaning of human belonging. When culture retreats from siding with tragedy, it does not merely remain neutral; it becomes an implicit partner in its reproduction. As Adorno and Said remind us, the silence of culture in the face of crime does not conceal it, but rather grants it a new mask that legitimizes and beautifies it.

Thus, envisioning the future requires redefining culture as a symbolic space of resistance capable of confronting “soft political evil” and redirecting collective consciousness toward an alternative human horizon—one that refuses the normalization of tragedy and restores to culture its role as a vigilant conscience rather than a deceptive mask.

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