

# Trauma as counter-revolutionary colonisation: Narratives from (post) revolutionary Egypt

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/ipt](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/ipt)**Vivienne Matthies-Boon**

University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

**Naomi Head**

University of Glasgow, UK

**Abstract**

We argue that multiple levels of trauma were present in Egypt before, during and after the 2011 revolution. Individual, social and political trauma constitute a triangle of traumatisation which was strategically employed by the Egyptian counter-revolutionary forces – primarily the army and the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood – to maintain their political and economic power over and above the social, economic and political interests of others. Through the destruction of physical bodies, the fragmentation and polarisation of social relations and the violent closure of the newly emerged political public sphere, these actors actively repressed the potential for creative and revolutionary transformation. To better understand this multi-layered notion of trauma, we turn to Habermas' 'colonisation of the lifeworld' thesis which offers a critical lens through which to examine the wider political and economic structures and context in which trauma occurred as well as its effects on the personal, social and political realms. In doing so, we develop a novel conception of trauma that acknowledges individual, social and political dimensions. We apply this conceptual framing to empirical narratives of trauma in Egypt's pre- and post-revolutionary phases, thus both developing a non-Western application of Habermas' framework and revealing ethnographic accounts of the revolution by activists in Cairo.

**Keywords**

Colonisation, counter-revolution, Egypt, Habermas, trauma

**Corresponding author:**

Vivienne Matthies-Boon, Department of Political Science, University of Amsterdam, Nieuwe Achtergracht 166, 1018 WV Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Email: [e.a.v.boon@uva.nl](mailto:e.a.v.boon@uva.nl)

## Introduction

In January 2011, the Egyptian revolution overthrew the long-standing and repressive regime of President Hosni Mubarak. The revolution started on the National Celebration of the Police Day and was directed at the brutality of Mubarak's crony capitalist police state that directly infringed on people's physical integrity and emotional wellbeing (Ismail, 2011, 2012). The mobilising potential of the revolution was, however, cut short and the revolutionary ideals of 'bread, freedom and social justice' were violently crushed by counter-revolutionary actors seeking to maintain political and economic power. High levels of violence penetrated into all aspects of Egyptian society and engendered extensive individual and collective trauma.

Based on testimonial life-story research with 40 young Caireen activists, we argue that trauma in Egypt entailed interconnected experiences of betrayal in the personal, social and political realms (also see Matthies-Boon, 2017). Advancing an intersubjective phenomenological and triadic account of trauma, we argue that individual, social and political trauma emerged as normative expectations were betrayed and crushed by counter-revolutionary actors in violent pursuit of their own strategic economic and political interests. Activists experienced a personal psychological breakdown of their assumptive world – that is, their generalised beliefs about self-worth, meaningful others and the benevolence of the world (Janoff-Bulman, 1992) – due to grave physical violence, or the immanent and persistent threat thereof, both in the pre- and post-revolutionary periods. Such shattering of the assumptive world also atomised social relations as activists experienced deep existential loneliness aggravated by social fragmentation, dehumanisation, alienation and anomie. Individual trauma was thus intimately connected to social trauma. We argue that these experiences of individual and social traumatisation were neither accidental nor the inevitable outcome of the revolutionary uprising, but rather a purposeful act, namely, the direct outcome of what we call political trauma, the violent betrayal of a collective (revolutionary) striving for an inclusive public sphere.<sup>1</sup>

In order to grasp this intricate triangle of traumatisation, we turn to Jürgen Habermas' 'colonisation of the lifeworld' thesis, which offers a critical lens on the political and economic dynamics through which such multiplying of trauma occurs. This perspective renders trauma a systematic attempt to break communicative, social and political relations. Trauma in the Egyptian case should not solely be understood from either an individualist psychological perspective or a social point of view, but rather as being constituted by *political* power and its violent strategic pursuit of instrumental reason. The dominant institutional actors (primarily the army and the Muslim Brotherhood leadership) sought to maintain and strengthen their own economic, political and administrative power at the cost of deliberative power and the transformation of others. They sought to break Egypt's divergent forms of social and political activism by continuously exerting violent exclusionary measures on the public realm through physical violence, dehumanisation, polarisation, repressive laws and other measures (see Human Rights Watch, 2012, 2014, 2017a, 2017b).

In what follows, we first outline a critique of trauma conceptualised solely as an individual or social experience. We then develop a Habermasian-influenced conception of trauma as constituting a multi-level process of traumatic betrayal. We apply this conceptual framing to empirical narratives of trauma in Egypt's pre- and post-revolutionary

phases. Such a Habermasian conception of trauma (and its empirical application) is crucial to our *political* understanding of such grave individual and social traumatising and contributes both to trauma debates and Habermasian scholarship. Its significance for the latter is not only the provision of a non-Western empirical application of a key theme in Habermas' theoretical framework but also its attention to how the violent destruction of the lifeworld is *emotionally* experienced. Habermas' rationalist account overlooks such emotional dimensions of the colonisation of the lifeworld since his philosophical project prioritises a cognitivist intersubjective reconstruction of universal reason (Crossley, 1998). Yet the emotional experience of the colonisation of the lifeworld through multi-layered forms of traumatic betrayal is crucial for practical and theoretical insights into political participation and emancipation since such emotional experiences when left unaddressed may become expressed through political apathy, social alienation and personal meaninglessness which are difficult yet crucial to overcome for political praxis (see Matthies-Boon, 2017). Our argument also contributes to the trauma literature which has largely reduced trauma to either an individualised, psychologised event or a social phenomenon without sufficient *political* consideration of the dynamics of systemic and calculative reason that colonise the communicative realms of the lifeworld.

### **Trauma: Individual, social and political betrayal**

A Habermasian understanding of trauma differs from the most common understanding of trauma as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which was first included in the American Psychological Association's (APA) practitioners' manual, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), in the 1980s after sustained lobbying by Vietnam War veterans. According to the latest definition (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, fifth edition (DSM-5)), trauma occurs due to confrontation with death or threat of death or serious injury or sexual violence and results in symptoms such as intrusions (including flashbacks, dreams and nightmares), avoidance behaviour, negative moods (including anger, depression, guilt and mistrust), arousal and hyperactivity (concentration and sleeping problems) (APA, 2013). While Egyptian activists may indeed have many of the 'symptoms' listed in the manual (see Matthies-Boon, 2017), this conception of trauma remains overly 'Cartesian' as it focuses on individualist diagnostic symptoms over and above wider social and political processes of meaning-making. Much of the mainstream trauma studies literature that employs notions of PTSD – and this somewhat ironically includes the post-structuralist works that arose during the 1990s (see Caruth, 1995, 1996; Felman and Laub, 1992; Laub, 1995) – remains tied to what Habermas would call a philosophy of the subject. It hence suffers from the limitations inherent in such a perspective, projecting onto history a universalist conception of trauma that ignores the contextual variations in how people respond to violent experiences (Bracken, 1998; Jones et al., 2003; see Herman, 1992). Although the DSM definition of PTSD makes reference to self, others and world, it does so from a cognitivist intra-psychical perspective that takes the mind and its thoughts as the primary analytical unit. It thereby replaces philosophical questions of meaning with questions of cognitive brain science (see Bracken, 2002; Hacking, 1995). Consequently, trauma becomes a faulty brain-wiring process: a shocking event which overwhelms the cognitive capacities of the

brain (see Caruth, 1996) and which disturbs the ‘software’ of the brain, whose ‘hardwire’ is perceived as universal (Bracken, 2002: 34). The brain is incapable of processing it into normal memory and hence stores it in raw memory, resulting in flashbacks and other symptoms of intrusion (Caruth, 1996). This is not to dismiss neuroscientific insights per se, but rather to draw attention to the *intersubjective* processes of meaning-making that trauma disrupts (also see Stolorow, 2013b; Stolorow and Atwood, 1992).

Ronnie Janoff-Bulman (1992) emphasises the intersubjective dimensions of trauma from an intrapsychic perspective when she argues that trauma breaks the socially constituted assumptive world, that the meanings accorded to the self, others and the world are destroyed. She explains that, with only a few exceptions, we have been socialised from an early age into believing that the world around us is benevolent, that social relations are meaningful and that the self is worthy through our interactions with ‘good enough’ caregivers. These early encounters form the foundation of our generalised expectations in life: they are the ‘basis of our subsequent interactions in and interpretations of the world’ (Janoff-Bulman, 1992: 21, 39). They hence maintain a ‘shared symbolic world that provides communal expectations about daily existence’ (Janoff-Bulman, 1992: 17). Of course, *rationaly* we know these assumptions to be delusional, yet *emotionally* we rely on them to build and maintain a stable and predictable world that enables us to positively function on a daily basis. The assumptive world is not immune to change: usually, it is gradually modified as we journey through life. However, in trauma, the changes to our assumptive world are sudden, deep and fundamental, as our basic trust in our relations to others, the world and self is betrayed. This shatters ‘the world’ we live in: the external world suddenly appears random, overwhelming and malevolent; social relations become random and meaningless; and our sense of self-worth is destroyed. The most basic assumptions of our life are exposed as a delusion, leading to existential loneliness, alienation and anxiety (Stolorow, 2007, 2011, 2013a).

Trauma fundamentally ruptures the continuity between past, present and future. It disrupts the contiguity between the social stock of knowledge and one’s own experiences, breaking the interpretative horizon within which meaning is made and resulting not only in depression, anxiety, rage and terror but also in ‘speechlessness’ (Bracken, 2002: 1; Kirschner, 1994). As Jenny Edkins (2003) explains – and Habermas would agree – our vocabulary is intertwined with the interpretative horizon in which meaning is intersubjectively constituted. Once this order breaks down in trauma, no common interpretative horizon can be found, save perhaps with other trauma survivors. For

the language we speak is part of the social order, and when the order falls apart around our ears, so does the language. What we *can* say no longer makes sense; what we want to say we cannot. There are no words for it. (Edkins, 2003: 8)

Trauma thus effectively places barriers within social relations as intersubjective recognition of such experiences, and the possibility of its communalisation through emotionally active and non-judgemental engagement is inhibited.

According to this phenomenological understanding of trauma, first-level (individual) and second-level (social) trauma are located on a spectrum: while they may be treated as analytically distinct, they are intimately connected (Matthies-Boon, 2017). Drawing an

analytical distinction between first- and second-level trauma is not intended to establish a hierarchy, but rather reflects the development of trauma theory which expounds individual accounts prior to exploring social and collective trauma. While first-level theorists such as Janoff-Bulman provide a socially rooted understanding of the individual's internal, psychological experience of trauma, theories of social trauma (Alexander, 2012; Eyerman, 2001; Smelser, 2004; Sztompka, 2000) elucidate the dynamics of social and societal destruction. Piotr Sztompka insists that social trauma occurs when deep social change paralyses the potential for collective agency, mobilisation and processes of social becoming. It is expressed through a sense of cultural disorientation and a deep paralysing distrust towards other people and institutions (Sztompka, 2004: 165). Such paralysis occurs due to the destruction of 'the socially shared pool of ready-made templates for symbolising, interpreting, framing and narrating the ongoing social praxis', and leads to social isolation and exclusion, social polarisation and the dehumanisation of others (Sztompka, 2000: 45). Not all radical social change is necessarily traumatic: only in instances where the traumatising conditions of change persist, or are possibly aggravated, does a cycle of social destruction occur that breaks the cultural stock of knowledge, resulting in social disorientation and anomie marked by distrust, demonisation, uncertainty and social anxiety (Sztompka, 2004: 165). Social trauma, therefore, is foremost a socio-ontological breakdown and fragmentation of social relations and structures that bind societies together. It is a process of social alienation, isolation and polarisation as avenues for communicative interactions are inhibited due to deep destructive social change.

The social trauma occurring in repressive authoritarian societies (such as those across the Middle East, including Egypt) occurs due to the restriction of communicative spaces and the strategic destruction of potential forms of social and collective flourishing. These repressive structures are socially traumatic in that they entail a

severe disturbance of the relation of individuals and groups with the larger community that contains them. It is not only that they cannot go out into the streets without fear, but that they feel forsaken by those who had the duty to succor them: authorities and social institutions. (De Tubert, 2006: 152)

Social trauma thus entails a foundational betrayal of social trust and disturbance of communicative relations, as a result of which people have 'withdrawn into a protective envelope, a place of mute, aching loneliness, in which the traumatic experience is treated as a solitary burden' (Erikson, 1995: 195). This conception is similar to what Marlies Glasius (2012), referring to post-revolutionary cases in Eastern Europe and Latin America, calls *atomisation*, namely, the deliberate isolation of each individual 'from all his peers through the machinations of the regime' (2012: 348).

## Trauma as systemic colonisation and political betrayal

We argue that in such contexts, trauma is inherently *political*. Hence, the political dimension forms the third level of the model of trauma we offer. We understand political trauma to encompass the betrayal of the normative expectation to be treated as equal and worthy

participants in public dialogue through the violent pursuit of strategic action. A useful notion within the trauma studies literature is the concept of continuous traumatic stress (CTS), developed by South African anti-apartheid activists, which highlights the ongoing and structural traumatic betrayal by political institutions (Eagle and Kaminer, 2013; Straker, 2013). In doing so, CTS overcomes the 'eventism' inherent in mainstream trauma theory: trauma is not a single event or short series of shocking events, but rather emerges due to a *system* of continuous abuse and violence. In cases of CTS, 'systems designed to create a sense of accountability and to minimise harm to citizens are ineffectual or overstretched, at best, or corrupt or collusive with informal systems of power at worst' (Eagle and Kaminer, 2013: 9). In these contexts, it is not only direct physical violence by an aggressor that is traumatic but also the fact that such violations are accompanied by 'resignation, collusion, nonretribution and licence for further violation at a systemic level' (Eagle and Kaminer, 2013: 10). In such (authoritarian) contexts, there is no respite from the continuous threat of violence, and the culture of fear and suspicion atomises people, while the main perpetrators remain immune from public accountability due to a closed or severely restricted public sphere.

While CTS effectively describes the effects of CTS, the underlying logic of why CTS occurs remains hidden from view. It is here that we explicitly turn to Habermas' theory of systemic colonisation that reveals the logic of instrumental reason that underpins the betrayal of the social contract between people and government and deliberately harms individual and social relations in the lifeworld. Trauma which occurs in such instances is not the accidental result of political developments but derives from violence strategically and purposively employed by state institutions in order to maintain economic and political power and crush the communicative sphere of the lifeworld where individuals should be able to engage in uncoerced political deliberation and decision-making. Such violent employment of strategic rationality breaks individual assumptive worlds and shatters the possibility of social and political flourishing (the potential of which we saw during the 25 January revolution). Habermas' colonisation theory offers a critical lens on these dynamics of power and its destructive impact on the lifeworld, which underpins our sense of self and social relations to others (Habermas, 1987).

Colonisation is a key concept in Habermas' theory that links two other central concepts of the 'system' and the 'lifeworld', 'characterising the nature of the relationship between them in advanced capitalist (and for the most part Western) societies' (Edwards, 2007: 112). The conflict Habermas identifies is over the 'growth of the 'system' (the *state* and its associated bureaucratic power plus the *economy* and its associated money and market logic) and the ways in which it increasingly impinges upon everyday life (Edwards, 2007: 112). Habermas argues that the system operates according to calculative goal-oriented instrumental reason, whereas the lifeworld is the realm where we come to understanding and is underpinned by communicative reason. The lifeworld entails the interpretative horizon against which we come to an understanding of our own identity (the subjective world), of others and social norms (the intersubjective world) and of the external world (the objective world) (Habermas, 1987: 120). It comprises the taken-for-granted background assumptions into which we have been socialised and orients us in our daily affairs. The lifeworld is constituted by an objective stock of cultural knowledge (or tradition), the sphere of social integration comprising institutionalised

social memberships and the sphere of socialisation forming one's personal identity in intersubjective relations with others. Habermas' colonisation thesis explains that while the system of economic power and political administration is grounded in the lifeworld, its steering mechanisms have increasingly become uncoupled from communicative validation and intrude on the realms of culture, social integration and socialisation, leaving a range of pathologies in its wake. Within the cultural sphere, it leads to a breakdown of meaning as the taken-for-granted stock of knowledge is destroyed. Within the social sphere, it results in anomie: a breakdown of social bonds, a tearing of social identity and a fragmentation of social values. In the personal sphere of socialisation, it destroys one's identity, giving rise to mental illnesses, feelings of helplessness and alienation, as well as demoralisation (Finlayson, 2005: 57; Habermas, 1987: 130).

The aim of Habermas' colonisation argument was to describe processes of alienation and reification within Western societies which, though violent, were perhaps less typified by direct physical force than the Egyptian counter-revolution. Yet, as Gemma Edwards (2007) has argued, 'colonization needs to be brought out of the realm of abstract theory and made sense of in terms of actual issues and policies affective actual struggles' (2007: 113). Counterbalancing this tendency towards abstraction, we contend that colonisation is a productive lens for analysing the calculative and strategic logic underlying the violent actions of repressive regimes such as Egypt's because what is at stake is the active and deliberate closing down of communicative processes of (potential) validation through the violent pursuit of instrumental reason. By shedding light on this logic, the theory of colonisation enables us to perceive the *political* dimension of the trauma experienced by Egyptian activists and the disastrous effects of the violent destruction of the public sphere on the interconnected personal, social and political realms. It enables us to understand the multi-layered nature of the trauma experienced as the counter-revolutionary forces violently betrayed the popular and deliberative aspirations for an inclusive public political sphere articulated during the 25 January revolution. These hopes centred around socio-economic improvements, increased political freedoms and physical and mental integrity, as encapsulated by the call for 'aish, hurriya, idala iqtemaya' (bread, freedom and social justice), which are the primary conditions of being full participants in dialogue (see Fraser, 2010). Instead of striving towards an inclusive public sphere, the counter-revolutionary actors destroyed these hopes through extreme physical violence, harsh social polarisation, repressive laws and exclusionary backhand deals that closed public space and the potential for a transformed public sphere. They thus engaged in what Habermas calls *concealed* strategic action (1984: 333): they operated behind the backs of other (revolutionary) actors, and their instrumental orientation towards their strategic success was not open for deliberation by those affected. Their violent instrumental pursuit of political power and neoliberal economic interests inflicted three levels of interconnected trauma – individual, social and political – which resulted in feelings of helplessness, isolation, alienation, anomie and demoralisation.

## Tracing trauma in Egypt

In what follows, we provide empirical insights into individual, social and political trauma as related by interviewees. Forty young Caireen activists between the age of 18 and

35 years (25 males, 15 females) were interviewed between October 2013 and February 2014. Through one of the author's close personal connections, participants were selected by snowball sampling and interviewed using a life-story testimonial approach (also see Matthies-Boon, 2017). The life-story approach was chosen because the personal narrative has analytical priority over any pre-determined interview questions, allowing for multifaceted and contradictory reactions as the interviewee is free to elaborate on his or her experiences at length (Benezir, 2009). This approach enables the researcher to pay attention to subtle trauma markers such as silences, body movements, emotional expressions and change of tone (Benezir, 2009), which helps avoid re-traumatisation and enables trauma-sensitive interviewing techniques (see Liamputtong, 2007). It should be noted that interviewees were not selected on the basis of 'having experienced trauma' but rather on being politically active in a broad sense, ranging from participation in protests and informal neighbourhood cooperatives to involvement in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and political parties. The interviewees covered a range of political perspectives (from Islamist – both Ikhwan and Salafist – to liberal and socialist) as well as a range of religious perspectives (including practicing and non-practicing Muslims, Coptic and Evangelical Christians, agnostics and atheists). All interviews were anonymised using randomly assigned numbers and securely stored, notes were taken in Dutch shorthand, and respondents were clearly instructed to avoid mentioning names, places and any other information that might identify them. The author conducting the fieldwork also explained that the interviews would be treated as confidential, and any part of the interview cited in publications would not identify individuals (Matthies-Boon, 2017).

Respondents described multi-layered trauma during the rule of former President Hosni Mubarak as well as during three distinct post-revolutionary phases: the interim rule of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (2011–2012) after the downfall of Mubarak in February 2011, the period under the elected Muslim Brotherhood President Mohammed Morsi (2012–2013), and the period after Morsi was deposed by the army in July 2013 (2013–2015; ongoing). Interviewees described how all these different regimes engaged in similar tactics of traumatisation: namely, the breaking of individual bodies and minds through physical violence, the destruction of social relations through atomisation and the closing off of political space through demonisation, backhand deals and concealed political practice. In what follows, we demonstrate that these multiple forms of trauma were integral to securing the regimes' pursuit of political and economic power.

### *Trauma in Mubarak's Egypt*

Respondents narrated how they suffered at the hands of the brutal police state under Mubarak. They relayed how the security apparatus would break individual bodies through torture, imprisonment and sexual assault with impunity. They noted the randomness with which ordinary citizens – including children – would be detained and how the security services particularly abused citizens in the lower classes who lived in poorer neighbourhoods and did not have political connections that would protect them. Their narratives closely correspond to Salwa Ismail's (2011, 2012) ethnographic studies on the social impacts of the Egyptian security state and illustrate the connection between

individual experiences of (the threat of) grave physical abuse and social fragmentation. Not only did (the threat of) physical violence at the hands of the state instil a fear that one could be physically and mentally crushed at any moment, but fear and suspicion also spread throughout society as a result of the wide network of informers that might include one's family, friends, teachers, local shop owners and microbus drivers (also see Ismail, 2011, 2012). The constant threat inhibited any potential for a sense of social solidarity as it ensured that no one would get any 'political ideas' that might threaten the regime's political and economic interests. In the words of this young man,

there was a lot of fear, and you cannot express yourself because you fear everyone around you. You know that we have a very strong intelligence security and you are expecting all the time that you speak that this guy or this woman is going to inform about you – and stuff like this. So we were suspicious, we were all the time trying to be on the fence, not taking one side. (Interview 32)

As many scholars have noted (see El Mahdi and Marfleet, 2009; Ismail, 2011, 2012; Kandil, 2012), although formed under the socialist regime of Abdel Nasser, the intensification of the police security state was inherently tied to the neoliberalisation of the Egyptian economy (since the time of Anwar Sadat) and the need to repress any potential unrest resulting from growing socio-economic grievances. The security state was therefore profoundly imbricated in the maintenance of Egypt's corrupt business-political elite and its socio-economic policies that forced individualised struggles for survival and fragmented social relations. The majority of Egyptians were deprived of education and health care, subjected to (terrible) informal employment opportunities and living in substandard informal housing, including graveyard settlements such as the Cities of the Dead. As this person remarked,

Under Mubarak's rule only 3 or maybe 4 cities in Egypt have been developed, whilst the rest of the country has not seen any major investment by the government. People are left to rot and survive in the informal economic sectors. All Mubarak did was to secure his own people, and play us out against one another. (Interview 38)

Respondents explained how the harsh brutality of social deprivation and the daily struggle for survival were not only individually traumatic in that it destroyed people's physical and mental wellbeing but were also socially and politically traumatic in that it isolated people and destroyed the possibility of a political voice:

What we were living in is not normal ... All the time I was feeling that I have no meaning to live in this country, I have no role I mean. I did not belong to it. Things happen and my opinion does not matter to anyone. Whatever you think and whatever you believe, no one cares about it. It does not matter. Things just go as the security and the politicians want it to go. And for sure this feeling makes you feel as if you are a foreigner in this country. Although you were born in this country, you at the same time find yourself totally separated from it. You are not integrated [...] And if you would also consider that going to a police station for example, just entering a police station, and you feel that you are accused and you are meaningless to the people, and you feel that whatever you are, you can be humiliated. For me this is a kind of political violence. (Interview 32)

The language of social alienation, as well as humiliation, despair, vulnerability and anger, abounds within these interviews. It became clear that the individual and social traumas experienced were a direct consequence of the Mubarak regime's instrumental desire to break the political potential of its subjects, as a result of which people retreated from the public sphere:

before the revolution, you ... even did not dare to speak about politics. You only spoke about politics like a meaningless thing for any people. You spoke about it as a meaningless thing for any people ... They would never express their true feelings about what is happening, just accepting what is happening, and they know what will happen and they know that the regime is much much stronger than them to change anything so when they spoke about politics it does not really matter to them. They are not interested in expressing their own personal opinions or fight based on their beliefs, no not at all. [...]. Yaeny,<sup>2</sup> people preferred to speak about football, about private things, about the female and sex but not about politics in general. (Interview 32)

The structural injustices suffered under Mubarak's rule represent forms of traumatic betrayal that were enacted on individual, social and political levels. These structural traumas embody the definition of CTS, namely that those political actors that should offer protection from random, life-threatening, traumatic violence (i.e. the police, politicians and judiciary) were its main perpetrators in an atmosphere of systemic corruption, immunity and unaccountability (Straker, 2013). Under this regime, any hope for political change was violently crushed by the security services and their networks of informants. Coupled with a corrupt judiciary and political unaccountability, the result was a culture of fear that depoliticised Egypt's public and private spheres and ensured that the regime maintained political and economic power.

### *Interregnum: The revolutionary lifeworld*

Such colonisation of the lifeworld is never completely able to crush the *potential* for creative social becoming. In Egypt, the opportunity to rise up came in January 2011, after the violent murder of Khaled Said,<sup>3</sup> years of small-scale and heavily securitised protests by underground social movements and the Tunisian uprising. Activists relayed that while they initially hesitated to participate in demonstrations out of fear of the security services, they gradually overcame their feelings of fear and suspicion as the protests gained momentum. They explained how they were drawn out of their isolation and into new forms of personal and political solidarity with people around them. As this young man remarked, this new solidarity gave rise to a sense of hope:

I had a very weird feeling I never felt this in my life. I had this massive gratitude for the Egyptian people, and I really appreciated how we can get together and protect each other against anything that might harm us ... At this phase I had a lot of faith in us, in the Egyptian people ... That all that we want will be achieved, that people will not live in poverty anymore. People will not take police brutality anymore. That people will not take the marginalisation and injustice anymore .... We would be a society that respects minorities, that respects everybody. (Interview 17)

While the days of the revolution experienced the violent response of the regime's Central Security Forces (CSF), reaching its peak during the Battle of the Camels on 2 February 2011, for many the sense of social unity with those around them set this period apart as they shared in a collective expression of the traumatic hardships faced. As this young person recalls,

I was so high and yet I was so scared, I will never forget my feelings the first time I hear in the square people shouting 'ishab urid isqat al nizam'. It was like all my inside was shaking. I was not feeling like myself. It was so strong, so clear, so loud. Really felt that something new happened. And yaeny, suddenly I did not see the same people. I was seeing a new Egypt. Suddenly I feel new hope coming. Suddenly I feel like ... a massive strength inside me, a massive power, willing of change. During the 28th, I was violent during that day though. [...] I did not have fear seeing other people been shot and have then been thrown with teargas and bullets around you. Seeing how they insist to continue. They want to go, they keep going and they are so strong, just catching the tear gas and throwing it back to the police. I was one of them, yaeny. I was totally with them. And I was feeling a huge anger inside me, a huge anger inside me. [...] it was not anger against the poor policeman or the poor soldier who did not understand anything but I was throwing my stone at all the depression I had suffered through my life. Towards all, yaeny, all unappreciation, a lack of dignity. Yes ... (Interview 32)

Interviewees particularly remarked how the 18 days opened a new collective and communicative space in which they openly and publicly discussed politics, even with those who held very different views. They saw the possibility of the formation of an inclusive Egyptian public sphere where people related to each other equally regardless of social standing, economic background, religious beliefs or political orientation. An alternative lifeworld was thus created wherein each person was deemed valuable and equal participants in the fight against the regime. There was toleration of and respect for differences, the emergence of inclusive and horizontal communicative relations, and a sense of human dignity, as this young woman noted:

You see the Salafist person sit next to the most liberal person. You know, I don't know if that would ever happen again. But it was very heart-warming. You see the poor classes with the crème de la crème and you see them sitting together enjoying a civil conversation and it was beautiful and so simple .... I think we need to restore that, you know something that actually brings us all together. You know, we need to attach to the human values. (Interview 10)

Interviewees noted that this was the first time they felt that they belonged to their country and felt 'Egyptian'. All the respondents look back on the 18 days of the revolution as a period of happiness, communicative openness and hope as they saw a glimpse of a different future. They described the determination for change, the fearless and bodily expression of anger and selflessness by those around them as overarching characteristics of the revolution, and how this renewed sense of identity, solidarity and political community derived from their collective desire to throw off the chains of political, social and economic repression experienced under Mubarak. And so, while the regime's CSF still responded violently – with extensive gunfire, knife attacks, setting tents ablaze and throwing concrete blocks from the top of buildings onto protestors – the burden of trauma

was no longer individualised. A new communicative space had opened, albeit temporarily, nurturing a different kind of lifeworld of connection, solidarity and equality, in which people spoke truth to power.

The military's political and economic interests were threatened by the possible succession of Mubarak by his son, Gamal Mubarak. As a result of Hosni Mubarak's coup-proofing tactics, the military's political influence had rapidly declined (see Kandil, 2012). Their suggestions for ministerial appointments were increasingly ignored in favour of a new crony capitalist business elite (Arafat, 2017). Gamal Mubarak was a leader of this new elite and was planning to further reduce the military's political power and its economic assets. The military held large swathes of industry and businesses across Egyptian society for which it used conscripted labour. Not only was this free supply of labour under threat, there were also plans to sell off their assets to this new business elite. Hence, 'the military's alignment with the protesters [during the 18 days] was more likely linked to a desire for self-preservation and a fear of weakened influence or power than a matter of ethical responsibility' (Arafat, 2017: 53).

### *Counter-revolution and the Supreme Council of Armed Forces' interim regime*

As soon as the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) took over, there was a concerted effort by the military regime to crush the potential of the collective uprising and maintain its political and economic privileges. The regime understood that in order to repress political potential, it had to break not only bodies but also the collective solidarity which had emerged through closing down the public political sphere and the (re) establishment of fear. During this period, at least 12,000 civilians were sent to military trials, protests and sit-ins were violently dispersed (resulting in many deaths and injuries), protestors (male and female) were systematically tortured and raped by the army and the security services, journalists were arbitrarily arrested and children were detained and tortured by army officers (Human Rights Watch, 2014). Moreover, the military regime sought to polarise social relations and exclude protesters from the legitimate public sphere by depicting them as thugs, prostitutes, foreign spies, criminals and unruly thugs on state television. They (strategically) insisted that with the removal of Mubarak the revolution was over and that it was time to reinstate 'stability' and 'security'.

The regime conducted notorious virginity trials during which they tested the virginity of detained female protestors so that 'the military could not be charged with rape by these women and girls'. They also organised gang rapes by balatagiya (state hired thugs) and plain-clothed intelligence officers. Such sexual violence is a particularly effective tool for closing down the public sphere, since it not only breaks an individual's sense of self and trust in social relations but also instils fear into others. As this young woman commented,

you know that you are looking around you the whole time and you don't want to be the kind of negative woman who would be like 'ok I will stay at home until harassment ends'. I would not do that but then it makes it really hard for you to be in that public space again. (Interview 28)

Severe sexual violence was also systematically inflicted on men, who were raped in detention by the military and the police. This young man was raped by the army during a protest in September 2011:

We went to protest and it was the second time I was put in jail because of protest. The army ... get us under the bridge after they caught us, our eyes are covered, our hands are tied on our back ... and ... eh ... yeany ... It was the first time that I was feeling ... [He sighs. There are tears in his eyes] ... That someone can break me, I did not have this feeling before. I felt like I was nothing ... eh ... when we was with the prison of the army they electrocuted us, they burnt us, hit us under our feet, and I was one of the last people who received the beating ... yeany ... Some person, I did not meet him again, it was ... eh ... he ... do you know the sound of a woman who is pregnant with a baby and gives birth and screams? He was screaming like her ... because of ... some son of a bitch ... soldier ... was fucking him. So ... like ... him ... [breathing heavily and crying now] ... after the fourth day, or something like this, when they found that we did not do nothing they let us free. But ... eh ... something inside of me was broken. (Interview 12)

The socially alienating effect is particularly severe with male rape since it is highly stigmatised, underpinned by a popular belief that the one 'receiving the rape' is passive and thus 'feminised', whereas the active person remains masculine. Furthermore, within Egyptian law, only female vaginal rape by someone other than her husband counts as rape, and thus, such experiences cannot even be addressed within Egypt's legal system.<sup>4</sup> Such experiences of sexual torture thus physically and psychologically break one's body and assumptive world, are socially traumatic in the creation of an (existentially lonely) stigmatised other and politically traumatic in that it destroys avenues for political mobilisation.

Sexual torture was one of a range of torture techniques used by the military on activists, including severe beatings with sticks and other sharp objects, burning by cigarettes, electrocution (including genitalia) and stress positions. Interviewees relayed how after their torture their interpretative horizon had shifted to the extent that they could not relate to others around them anymore; they feared that they were radiating negativity towards others and became preoccupied with their own individual death. Hence, we should thus understand that while torture is a series of violent acts inflicted on an individual's body and mind, it has socially traumatic consequences as it erodes a person's trust in their social relations. The purpose of torture is thus to strategically close down opportunities for political and social transformation and, crucially, to individualise the traumatic burden of this political act.

One young man narrated his torture at the hands of the military in the Egyptian museum gardens on 9 March 2011 as follows:

What happened is that they arrested about 200, about 20 girls and 180 men and tortured us in front of the Egyptian museum outside the garden and the torturing takes about 5 hours .... They tortured all of us but for me, the case was completely different. After 10 minutes, they started smashing my head on a column, then they take off my clothes except underwear and then tied a rope on my leg and they pull me to inside the garden and they started the torturing by wooden sticks, metal sticks. Some officers jumping a lot on my back on my head, and in the end they

electrocuted me, they burnt me – and they cut my hair with broken glass. And during the torturing they try and use words to break your spirit and to break you inside ... They have no mercy, they don't know this word. (Interview 37)

He explained that this experience stripped him of his political naiveté as he was one of the first to see that the military were not the protectors of the revolution but rather were driven only by their own political and economic interests.

For many respondents, this realisation came later during the Maspéro Massacre of Coptic Christians at the hands of the army and following the secret handover deal between the army and the Muslim Brotherhood around the critical time of the Mohamed Mahmoud street battles in November 2011. Here, activists realised that their trust in the military was misplaced and they felt betrayed as the military engaged in concealed strategic actions to secure their political position. As this person notes,

at the very beginning we trusted the army, we said that the army has taken the right decisions, but unfortunately it turned out that maybe the army had bad intentions ... they responded violently to legitimate demands from different groups within the society, including Christians, revolutionaries. They were not keen on a real democratic transition. They were just keen on doing political deals with the more stable group in the society, which is the Muslim Brotherhood. (Interview 7)

The November 2011 handover deal between the Muslim Brotherhood and the SCAF centred on early parliamentary elections with presidential elections planned in June 2012. It was as a result of this deal that the Muslim Brotherhood was able to emerge as the main political party in the parliamentary elections of late 2011 and early 2012. In return, the military was allowed to safeguard its economic assets and forego parliamentary oversight of its budget. The military thus (temporarily) forfeited its formal political power to a political actor that would preserve its economic status quo. It also provided the appearance of a 'formal democratic transition' that satisfied key international actors such as the United States, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank while ensuring that new (and less established) political actors would not have sufficient space and time to organise and enter successfully into the formal public sphere. Examining this deal through a Habermasian lens reveals not only that it set the trajectory of Egypt's post-revolutionary developments by closing down 'disorderly' communicative spaces but also that there was a logic of instrumental reason at work which ensured that economic and political power was restored to repressive and authoritarian actors at the expense of the rights and freedoms of citizens.

Significantly, this 'formal democratic transition' came at the time of the 6-day Mohamed Mahmoud street battle in which thousands of protestors fought the army and the CSF leaving at least 40 people dead and more than 3000 injured. For interviewees, Mohammed Mahmoud was one of the most shocking and traumatic clashes not only due to the high level of violence but also because revolutionary solidarity had become severely fragmented. Many were angered at the painful abandonment by the Muslim Brotherhood leadership:

I will never forget and tolerate what the Brotherhood did at that moment ... I can tolerate the police as we expected this of them but never the Brotherhood ... they did not only remain silent

they incited against us ... the Brotherhood wasted a historical chance for this country to become a real democratic country when they had their deals with the SCAF. (Interview 7)

Such critical voices also emerged among the youth wing of the Brotherhood, as this young Brotherhood remarked: 'I felt that the revolution was being stolen. We gave the power of the revolution to the SCAF which was part of Mubarak ... I felt that the Islamists betrayed the movement' (Interview 2). The explicit reference to betrayal by a Muslim Brother of his own leadership is testament to the impact that such political actions had on individuals and on social relations.

Interviewees felt betrayed not only by the Muslim Brotherhood but also by what they termed the 'Hizb al Kanaba', the non-participants prone to believe the military's televised propaganda that depicted protestors as thugs, prostitutes and foreign spies. Due to the historical fights against the British and Israeli colonisers, and the fact that the army is formed by layers from all levels of Egyptian society due to forced conscription, the military is a celebrated institution (Arafat, 2017:53) and so its calls for 'stability' and 'order' no longer fell on deaf ears. For many respondents, this set the stage for a re-individualisation of the traumatic burden as social bonds were ruptured.

The handover deal's rapid move towards elections during such a period of intense violence along with the demonisation of other political actors by the SCAF represented a violation of Habermasian principles of deliberation. It was an active attempt to violently close down newly formed intersubjective communicative spaces in the public sphere. The combination of direct physical force, social polarisation and political exclusion was experienced by activists as a fundamental betrayal of the revolution. As this young person recalled,

When the elections started, my happiness stopped ... When people started to be political, and be asked to go to the election box and make his choice, it was a very sad moment for me as the politicians were trying to direct people. And they are using misusing words, misusing people's religion and misusing people's dreams and misusing people's needs. (Interview 32)

Activists narrated how politics became a fragmented terrain of manipulation and contestation as political actors ignored the demands of the people and sought to instrumentalise the public sphere for the purposes of securing and maintaining political and economic power. The inability of alternative political voices to organise and unite within this difficult political environment became particularly apparent not only during the parliamentary elections but also during the later presidential elections in June 2012. During the early presidential elections which were part of the handover deal, the absence of agreement and organisational capacity fragmented the revolutionary votes, leading to a run-off between the Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohammed Morsi and ex-NDP (National Democratic Party) member Ahmed Shafiq, both candidates belonging to the pre-revolutionary neoliberal consensus. For many respondents, this was a watershed moment, and one interviewee explained that it was 'one of the worst days since January 25'. Her experience illustrates ways in which the body becomes implicated in and subject to the structures of power and political betrayal:

so I am sitting there writing and publishing and then sharing...and my blood pressure is like, it is rising very gradually .... And I am sitting there writing like crazy, like really fast really fast

really fast. And then my nose starts bleeding because my blood pressure is way too high, and I start crying and became hysterical, and my mum came into the room and was like you okay? And I was like ‘What the fuck, I hate this country, I cannot believe they voted for Morsi and Shafiq. I hate this country. The fuckers. I was really angry. Yeah, it was like a mixture of blood coming out of my nose and like tears and like hysterical cries and it was probably the worst day during the last three years. It was the worst day .... How could they choose these terrible terrible candidates? I was devastated. (Interview 30)

### *Violence continued: President Morsi’s rule and after*

During Morsi’s rule, physical and mental violence persisted, while social polarisation and political exclusion rule further increased, even resulting in civilian violence in both public and private spaces. The Muslim Brotherhood, it should be noted, is an established actor within the Egyptian political landscape so that despite its repression under Mubarak it was able to emerge as a solid economic actor. It became particularly influential in syndicates, universities and economic enterprise, leading to what some call ‘pious neoliberalism’ (Atia, 2013). Its leadership comprises large business networks and tycoons (such as Khairat el-Shater) that promising economic security to the military was also actively advancing their own neoliberal economic agenda through deals with Qatari investors as well as international institutions such as the IMF. Interviewees remarked that in pursuing neoliberal entrepreneurial economic policies under an Islamic veneer, the Brotherhood not only failed to address the socio-economic inequalities underpinning the revolution but also restricted public space. As this young activist remarked, ‘They wanted to ... dominate all positions in the state. They ... didn’t really believe in pluralism ... They didn’t even believe in dialogue – a real national dialogue with the opposition’ (Interview 13). Revealing the logic of instrumental reason and strategic action at work, one interviewee said of the choice that the Muslim Brotherhood made when they came to power:

They basically understood that the Mubarak regime is still powerful, they still have a lot of money, and networks of power and circles of power. So instead of trying to unite, with like you know the youth groups to try and dismantle the Mubarak regime, they decided to unite with the Mubarak regime to dismantle the youth groups and the revolutionaries. (Interview 8)

During the Brotherhood’s rule, torture was no longer confined to police cells and military detention places but was carried out by Muslim Brother vigilantes in public spaces including mosques and street corners (Al Nadeem, 2013; Al-Aswany, 2013). This ‘normalisation’ of torture contributed to multiple levels of trauma through the shattering of expectations of safety and security in the social and political public sphere. Reflecting the traumatic betrayal embodied in these actions, one interviewee stated that it

was a bit of shock, because we were used to the policemen doing torture, the army doing torture ... the politicians doing torture like military police also for intelligence or whatever but for normal people like here in the streets torturing people who they think are thugs or whatever, different from them, dehumanising people by other people is really shocking. (Interview 22)

Many interviewees explained they became scared as the Brotherhood actively excluded other political actors from the public sphere and issued laws which sought to

impose a particularly Islamist vision of identity without regard for internal Egyptian differences. After Morsi issued a presidential decree in which he granted himself immunity from any legal challenge – thus closing the last avenue for public accountability – and called for a referendum on what many perceived to be an overly Islamist draft of a new constitution, the presidential palace clashes broke out which lasted for 2 days (5–6 December 2012) and resulted in 10 deaths and injuries to at least 748 people. For respondents, these clashes deepened their experience of social and political traumatisa-tion since civilians were no longer just fighting state security forces but each other as violence took on sectarian forms:

I'm always used to conflict and violence from the police, from the army, but what I saw around the palace in December 2012 was traumatic, shocking, so ehm ... I mean I ... It is very hard to see one of your friends, or those who used to be your friends...I won't say that they are shooting us or anything like that because very few of them were using weapons, but almost every one of them was throwing stones, being violent with us ... so imagine that anyone of them could be your friend, your neighbour, your brother even. And what made me more shocked that I ... I always used to be a pacifist, peaceful ... After the Islamists were attacking us, I started attacking back, throwing stones back and I was shocked at my reaction afterwards. I went back home, wondering how I did that. (Interview 1)

These clashes were traumatic not only because of the level of violence but also because it tore Egyptian society apart. People who used to be friends, colleagues and family members now openly fought each other as relations were polarised along anti- and pro-Brotherhood lines. Many interviewees had at least one close family member or long-standing friend who belonged to the 'other' side and with whom they now fought or had broken off relations. These tensions came to a head during the summer of 2013 when Morsi was deposed by the military after the Tamarod (Rebellion) campaign led by a Nasserist and Old Regime (pro-military) alliance successfully mobilised large sections of Egyptian society to demonstrate on 30 June. It would be inaccurate, however, to interpret this demonstration as the representation of a new inclusive public sphere. As one respondent put it, it was the lack of idealism – or hope for substantive change – that set 30 June apart from 25 January:

They called *against* Morsi, they didn't call *for* anything. And January 25th for me is all about calls for freedom, for all these ... chants that we had. So I fear that all our accomplishments are rolled back, already public space has been taken away from us. (Interview 17)

Indeed, it turned out that these demonstrations had been largely coordinated and supported by the Egyptian security services who were keen on retaining their political interests as they had been dismayed by the "Brotherhoodisation" of Egyptian politics.

Egypt's political public sphere was further compromised on 14 August when the security services raided the Muslim Brotherhood sit-ins of Rabaa and Ennahda. During the violent dispersal, the security services killed over 817 Muslim Brotherhood supporters, and many more were injured. The traumatic effects were apparent for all those who had either been present or who had lost family or friends during these massacres. For example, one young woman narrated how the collected bodies inside the mosques were covered with blocks of ice as it was over 40°C, and she remains haunted by the vision and

smell of wading through a thick layer of blood mixed with ice water as she was trying to help relatives to find their loved ones. Another young man described how his cousin was paralysed as a result of his injuries but has not been able to get hospital treatment due to fear of his immediate arrest or immediate execution by security services. Others relayed how they were nearly shot at Rabaa and lost relatives and friends as the gunfire surrounded them and how they feared they were going to die too. They explained how, in the wake of the Rabaa massacre, heated arguments to the point of physical violence, sometimes even to the point of death, became pervasive inside homes and in public places. They narrated how they experienced existential loneliness and feelings of pervasive violence and radical insecurity and how this led to depression and anxiety that culminated in their social isolation and political withdrawal from the public sphere (see Matthies-Boon, 2017).

The Rabaa massacre was a decisive blow to the revolutionary lifeworld by the military and the Egyptian security services since it completed the counter-revolutionary colonisation of the lifeworld. As El Sherif argued,

The army is expanding its economic empire, crowding out the public and private sectors. The military has become an even more privileged economic actor. It is not taxed, it is not subject to competition, it [still] uses free conscript labor, and it monopolizes public land and other public resources – all with no public oversight. (El Sherif, 2017)

As one young activists pointed out, the fight changed into one ‘between two major dictatorships over power, not over the revolution and really changing what is happening’ (Interview 32). Interviewees became depoliticised as the public sphere closed and they felt stuck between the two authoritarian blocks of the military and the Brotherhood. The words of one interviewee succinctly sum up our argument regarding the relationship between the failure of the revolution and the role of instrumental reason driving strategic action by the Muslim Brotherhood and the military:

Because the issue [is] that you still have a strong interested group, which is the deep state. Even after Mubarak stepped down you have the military junta in power, you have Morsi. So having the Brotherhood out of the system now doesn’t mean that there is going to be more democracy. No that’s still the same, that’s still the deep state, the military and the intelligence interest-network. They want to dominate the political, social and economic scene again you know. (Interview 13)

## Conclusion

Trauma is not limited to individually felt experiences of violence or to social ruptures constituted through sudden, radical change. Rather, as the testimonies of Egyptian activists have demonstrated, trauma can be understood as a multi-layered, politically mediated experience. Habermas’ distinction between instrumental and communicative reason helps make sense of the different yet interconnected layers of traumatisation in Egypt. His corresponding recognition of instrumental and strategic action enabled an identification of the role played by political and economic forces in the experience of Egyptian activists. In order to contain the revolutionary threat, counter-revolutionary state actors

had to 'break the people' and their social embeddedness so as to preserve their political and economic interests. Thus, we argue that Habermas' systemic and social approaches are important for understanding trauma because they offer insights into the dynamics of power and their distorting impacts on the lifeworld as well as how these shaped traumatic betrayals of normative expectations in the individual, social and political realms. By locating trauma in interconnected spheres, we also hope to shed light on the lived experiences of activists *for* activists, thereby providing tools through our analysis to make sense of the different layers of traumatisation in Egypt.

## Notes

1. We employ Habermas' counterfactual term the public sphere as the realm of (institutionalised) public deliberation which in authoritarian contexts is limited, hampered and indeed deformed due to its colonisation by repressive political actors in instrumental pursuit of political and economic power.
2. Yaeny is an interjection common in spoken Arabic, the meanings of which range from 'I mean ...' to 'like' and 'ehm'. We decided to maintain the original Arabic term as it provides insight into the intonation of particular expressions and sentences to regional specialists.
3. A young middle-class male who was beaten to death in an Internet café in Alexandria and whose pictures spread across social media arousing collective anger.
4. As explained in Matthies-Boon (2017): Article 267 of Egypt's penal code criminalises vaginal penetration without consent but article 60 of the penal code overrides the application of the penal code on those who committed a criminalised act out of 'good intention', and the marriage certificate provides sufficient proof in the Egyptian judicial system that the man did not intend any harm to his wife. Rape is restricted to the penetration of female genitalia, since this is the highest violation of 'honour', and male anal penetration is merely a case of indecent assault, making male rape legally impossible (see Egypt Penal Code 1973; information also based on personal communication with an anonymised Egyptian lawyer (19 January 2017)) Also see Salama (2015) and EIPR (2015).

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## Author biographies

Vivienne Matthies-Boon is an Assistant Professor in the International Relations of the Middle East and the Coordinator of the Zeytun Exchange Programme with the Middle East in the Department of Political Science at the University of Amsterdam. She has an interdisciplinary background in Philosophy (particularly Habermasian Critical Theory), Middle Eastern Studies, Politics, Sociology and Psychology. Her primary interests are in the intersection between bottom-up anthropological research on social, political and personal issues of 'wellbeing' 'mental health' and 'trauma' in the

Middle East and their conceptual relation to greater existential questions of 'humanness', 'being' and 'suffering'. Rooted in critical theory, her work on mental health particular centres around social justice, human rights and a transformation of political repression, marginalisation, and displacement. Her work has been published in *Ethical Perspectives*, *Journal of Global Ethics*, *Journal of North African Studies* and *Studies in Social Justice*.

**Naomi Head** is a Senior Lecturer in Politics and International Relations at the University of Glasgow. She is also an Honorary Research Fellow at the Institute of Conflict, Cooperation and Security at the University of Birmingham. Her research is focused on communicative ethics, questions of political narratives and legitimacy, and the politics of empathy and emotions. She is the Author of *Justifying Violence: Communicative Ethics and the Use of Force in Kosovo* (Manchester University Press, 2012). Her work has appeared in *International Theory*, *Review of International Studies*, *Journal of Global Ethics*, *International Journal of Peace Studies* and *Politics*.