

The silent war on signs: Unpacking the concept of semiocide and its implications for the Baha'i community in Iran

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Abstract: Within the field of conflict and violence studies, there exists a range of subtle yet profound forms of violence that often remain underexplored. This paper addresses the concept of semiocide, which refers to the destruction of culturally significant signs, stories, symbols, and narratives. Through unpacking of the theoretical foundations of semiocide, the study highlights its distinct nature and potential for further exploration in cultural violence and conflict studies. Utilizing content analysis of various media sources, the study examines the semiocidal practices perpetrated against the Baha'i community in Iran. The findings illustrate the systematic erasure and manipulation of the Baha'i cultural identity through three semiocidal mechanisms. These insights shed light on the complex dynamics of cultural violence, not only within the specific context of Iran but also providing valuable implications for understanding similar phenomena in other socio-cultural contexts. By bridging the gap between theory and practice, this study offers a nuanced discussion of semiocide, contributing to a broader comprehension of cultural violence and cultural hegemony, and thereby enriching the discourse in conflict and violence studies.

Keywords: semiocide; violence; cultural hegemony; Bahatism; cultural semiotics; conflict

Introduction

In the study of conflict and violence, there is a tendency to focus on the immediately noticeable and physically destructive aspects – battles waged, buildings crumbled, lives tragically lost. However, beneath this overt layer, another form of violence often unfolds, quieter but no less devastating. This form of violence targets “the culturally meaningful”, including signs, stories, symbols and narratives.

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These are the threads that weave together the fabric of a community's identity and when they are severed, the damage can be profound and long-lasting. In this context, the situation of the Baha'i community in Iran is particularly illustrative. According to a recent report and its annex by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2022), the persecution of the Baha'i community in Iran is notable for its dual nature: it encompasses both overt acts of violence and efforts to strip the Baha'i community systematically of a source of their minority cultural and religious identity and to erase traces of their past. Understanding the full scope of the form of violence targeting "the culturally meaningful" becomes possible through examining the experiences of communities such as the Baha'is in Iran.

Although culture played a key role in Raphael Lemkin's initial conceptualization of genocide (Lemkin 1944: 79), it has mostly taken a back seat in violence and genocide studies, and scholars of these fields have mostly been obsessed with direct and physical manifestations of violence. A good case in point is Adam Jones' *Genocide: A Comprehensive Introduction* (2017), where he compiles twenty-five scholarly definitions of genocide, from Peter Dorost's (1959: 64) definition emphasizing "deliberate destruction of physical life" to Powell and Peristerakis' (2014: 88) definition based on "violent erasure of a collective identity".

Even though the evolution of definitions has shown promising signs of a more inclusive understanding of violence and genocide over decades, only one out of the twenty-five definitions (Bauer 1984) includes the term 'culture'. Multiple reasons can be identified as to why violence against culture has not been discursively formalized in due manner, such as avoiding issues that might cause collective culpability on a national level or circumventing controversial issues around ideological over-coding that might be a side-effect of inevitable processes such as globalization. That said, some scholarly endeavours in genocide studies have attempted to address this narrow understanding of genocide. A notable development is the concept of 'social genocide', encompassing a wider range of destructive actions such as displacement, marital restrictions, and language eradication (Meiches 2019: 110). Yet this approach remains marginally embraced in academia, partly due to concerns that it weakens the gravity of genocide and criticisms that it neglects genocide's material and cultural aspects while overly emphasizing social dynamics (Meiches 2019: 126, 110).

In this regard, Bachman's pathological study of culture's underdog status in the discourse around genocide sheds light on a consequential political decision at the crossroads of law and history. According to his research (Bachman 2019: 46–51), colonial powers joined forces to ensure that cultural genocide would be excluded from the methods prohibited by the United Nations' 1948 *Convention*

on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in an effort to absolve themselves from related obligations under international law as well as avoiding inculcating themselves in genocide-related crimes. This exclusion meant that practices such as destruction of a group's cultural heritage and coercive cultural assimilation were outside the Genocide Convention's scope of protection.

That said, there has been a shift in the perspective on the role of culture in genocide and violence. A considerable body of literature (e.g. Mundorff 2020; Huber 2018; Bilsky, Klagsbrun 2018; Cohen 2017) has been produced in recent years trying to go beyond the limited understanding of genocide only as direct physical violence against a social group. The so-called cultural shift in conflict and violence studies is still in an evolutionary trajectory and needs to be introduced to more dynamic methods and vocabulary from other disciplines, which is one of the aims of this paper. The semiotic approach of this paper tries to explore how certain sign systems are privileged over others through negative semiosis.

The methodology employed in this paper for exploring the concept of semiocide involves a critical analysis of existing literature on the topic, complemented by content analysis of relevant materials outlined below. The literature review includes scholarly texts in semiotics, biosemiotics, ecology, and linguistics, providing a comprehensive overview of the concept of semiocide and its implications. These sources were chosen for their relevance to semiotic research, and their contribution to the emerging discourse on semiocide. The content analysis gathered data on examples of semiocide from official documents, news articles, academic journals, NGO reports on human rights in Iran, first-hand accounts from Iranian Baha'is and online platforms. The selection of media sources was based on inclusion and exclusion criteria to identify texts that discuss examples of semiocide, even if the term was not explicitly mentioned. The data analysis involved a thematic analysis of the data gathered through media content analysis, to identify patterns and themes related to the concept of semiocide. A potential limitation of the methodology employed in the study is the occasional use of personal accounts and materials from Baha'i-affiliated organizations, due to the scarcity of alternative sources. This was an inevitable choice, and while these sources enrich the research with diverse and first-hand perspectives, they may also bring along viewpoints that are not universally representative or entirely objective.

The theoretical exploration of semiocide in this paper is informed by the insights of various thinkers, such as Juri Lotman, Gayatri Spivak, Ernesto Laclau, Giorgio Agamben, and Johan Galtung, each selected for their unique contributions to understanding this complex phenomenon. These thinkers, although originating from diverse theoretical systems, provide complementary perspectives on subtle forms of violence, hegemony and culture. Their collective insights provide

a robust theoretical foundation for examining the real-world context of the Baha'i community in Iran, offering a comprehensive understanding of the semiocidal practices perpetrated against this community.

Even though the theoretical framework of semiocide provides a holistic understanding of cultural destruction by incorporating and extending concepts such as 'ethnocide' and 'ecocide' (both can be seen as specific manifestations of semiocide), these two concepts have not been utilized as separate theoretical schemata in this paper. 'Ethnocide', as defined by Pierre Clastres (1974: 105), refers to the systematic destruction of a culture, with the aim of replacing it with another culture, often seen as superior. 'Ecocide', on the other hand, is the extensive damage to, destruction of, or loss of an ecosystem of a given territory to such an extent that the peaceful enjoyment by the inhabitants has been severely diminished (Higgins 2014, cited in Mehta, Merz 2015: 5). In other words, both terms revolve around the notion of destruction, yet 'ethnocide' concentrates on cultural aspects, whereas 'ecocide' highlights environmental aspects. While 'ethnocide' does involve the destruction of culture, it does not fully capture the specific type of violence experienced by the case studied in this paper, i.e. the Baha'i community in Iran. The violence inflicted on this community is not just a destruction of their culture – in the sense that Clasters (1974: 105) explains as “the dissolution of the multiple into the One”, but involves a more nuanced form of violence that needs to be dissected. This is the destruction and suppression of their semiotic systems, their signs, stories and symbols that give meaning to their existence. Moreover, while ecocide provides a valuable framework for understanding environmental destruction, it is not, *per se*, an appropriate conceptual perspective for the study of the Baha'i community in Iran as the harm inflicted upon the Baha'i community in Iran is not primarily about ecological relationships or environmental degradation. Instead, it involves both physical violence against Baha'i individuals and the suppression of their cultural meaning-making processes.

Prior to outlining the scope of the study, it must be clarified from the very beginning that, although sometimes used interchangeably, 'cultural violence' and 'cultural genocide' do not necessarily refer to the same thing. While 'cultural violence', inspired by Galtung's (1990: 291) famous definition, refers to different aspects of culture used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence, 'cultural genocide' refers to targeting outgroup cultural groups in the process of domination and destroying both material and non-material features of cultural significance associated with these groups, encompassing literature, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs (Donders 2012: 290; Davidson 2012: 1). The overlapping of the two might lead to understanding the one as a technique or the outcome of the other, which would stand in the way of accurate analysis.

Also, incorporating culture into studies of genocide and violence is not without its critics. Brubaker (2006: 2–3) thinks such a formulation gives rise to “groupism”, which jeopardizes the study by reinforcing the tendency to take bounded groups as fundamental units of analysis and reifying ethnic groups as though they were internally utterly homogeneous with common purposes.

Also, the following question has been raised: “[W]here to draw the line in order to avoid the stubborn defense of any cultural practice for the mere sake that it is deemed cultural” (Novic 2016: 3). The current paper aims to find a way out of the limitations that these critics have highlighted by assuming a more semiotic view of the culture–violence intersection. To this end, it will bring the understudied concept of ‘semicide’ as destruction of meaningful signs and stories either by malevolence or carelessness (Puura 2002) to light and introduce it to the lexicon of the related fields such cultural studies and peace and conflict studies.

It is not uncommon to structure studies at the intersection of culture and violence around binary oppositions such as centre/periphery, outgroup/ingroup, and hegemonic/subordinate. In other words, it is culturally hegemonized social groups within the realm of influence of a cultural and political upper hand that tend to be the object of such studies. The available translations of Gramsci’s works do not provide us with a specific definition of cultural hegemony. That being said, due to the intricacies of the issue and emerging “modern” forms of cultural hegemony, especially in the age of globalization, it would not be a good idea to remain limited to a single definition of this phenomenon, not to mention that a rigid definition, despite its supposed good intentions, might give rise to new forms of hegemony.

Nevertheless, it is possible to turn to and marry the ideas of two thinkers from critical theory tradition in order to clarify to what kind of cultural hegemony this paper is referring. Such form of hegemony occurs when, on the one hand, there is no symmetry between the sides of communication, and equal communication is distorted by either physical or psychological coercion. Alternatively stated, the Habermasian “ideal speech situation” (Habermas 1990: 369–372) is non-existent. On the other hand, the cultural forms, cultural practices, ideas, aspirations and objectives that transcend the established “universe of discourse” are either “repelled or reduced” (Marcuse 1964: 14).

With this understanding of cultural hegemony and in the same vein as previous studies which have focused on cultural minorities and marginalized cultural groups, this article has chosen the Baha’i community in Iran as its case study. The Baha’i faith is a monotheistic religion founded in the mid-19th century by Seyyed Ali Muhammad Shirazi (also known as the Báb) in Iran. Today, the number of Baha’i adherents amounts to around five to eight million worldwide. The Baha’i community in Iran has undergone different forms of persecution since the very

early days of its formation, but darker days came with the onset of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. The new constitution of Iran recognized only Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians as legitimate religious minorities.² This assigned the status of unprotected infidels to individuals of Baha'i faith in Iran, giving the Islamic regime *carte blanche* to launch a campaign of terror and hostility against the Baha'is of Iran, which has continued to this day. This article will demonstrate the mechanisms of semiocidal violence perpetrated against the age-old cultural identity around Baha'i faith in post-revolutionary Iran.

1. Semiocide in theory and practice

The destruction of the meaningful is a topic addressed by many scholars, particularly in the field of post-colonial studies. For instance, in his discussion of how Western domination has marginalized knowledge and wisdom that had been in existence in the global South, Boaventura De Sousa Santos (2015: 92) coins the term 'epistemicide' to refer to "the death of the knowledge of the subordinated culture", which for him is "one of the conditions of genocide". That said, the idea was first conceptualized semiotically by Estonian geologist Ivar Puura. The text where the term 'semiocide' first appeared bore the title "*Loodus meie mälus*" ["Nature in our memory"], was originally written in Estonian and published in the journal *Eesti Loodus* [*Estonian Nature*] in 2002. The original text was translated into English by Elin Sütiste and Timo Maran, as a tribute to Puura's contributions to semiotics, and published in 2013 (one year after Puura's decease) as an appendix to Maran's article "Enchantment of the past and semiocide: Remembering Ivar Puura". In his article, Puura (2013[2002]: 152) gives this definition of 'semiocide':

[...] a situation in which signs and stories that are significant for someone are destroyed because of someone else's malevolence or carelessness, thereby stealing a part of the former's identity. In everyday life this often takes place in the form of material or mental violence among children as well as grownups: things that are significant and have become dear to somebody are threatened to be or are actually destroyed.

Aside from the semiotic conceptualization of the destruction of the meaningful, the four key words in this definition – 'identity', 'material', 'mental' (non-material), and 'violence' – give semiocide a robust theoretical status. Provided that it is aptly

² Only the Jews, the Christians, the Sabaeans (an ancient religious group in South Arabia), and the Zoroastrians of ancient Persia fall under the category of the Islamic notion of 'The People of the Book', who deserve legal protection.

developed, it can serve as a theoretical framework to explore phenomena such as cultural hegemony, cultural violence, and cultural genocide.

1.1. Earlier research on semicide

In the few scholarly works which refer to semicide, it is formulated as the flip side of semiosis or negative semiotics. In Lotman's early cybernetic conception of "culture as information" in which culture is defined as "the totality of non-hereditary information acquired, preserved, and transmitted by the various groups of human society" (Lotman 1977[1967]: 213),³ semicide would be the agent standing in the way of generative "mechanism of culture". For later Lotman, though, semicide would be the inorganic force trying to break off the isomorphic interconnection between the individual (or the social group) with the totality of the heterogenous and multilingual yet coherent aggregate of texts (Lotman 1990: 103, 159, 226) that is culture.

Searching for the term 'semicide' in two of the largest English languages corpuses, the NOW corpus with around 17 billion words of data and iWeb corpus with 14 billion words of data, clearly shows that this concept is conspicuous by its absence. While the former corpus shows zero results, the latter shows a single result which is a reference to an electronically published article by Sarah Perry on the topic of temporality⁴ in which the definition of semicide is given through the aforementioned article by Puura, claiming that "the tactic of semicide [...] can shape both simulated and temporal futures".

Most occurrences of the concept in scholarly works can be found in biosemiotics-related texts where it has been used either to get across a certain point in the text or as a suggestion for further reading. For instance, Morten Tønnessen, who has found the concept interesting from a biosemiotic perspective, argues that language is a key factor in studying and applying the concept of 'semicide' for two reasons: "First, because when languages are going extinct, semicide occurs and, second, because language can make us blind to the ongoing non-linguistic semicide" (Tønnessen 2015: 94). Additionally, he poses the question as to what the ethical responsibility of semiotics can be, particularly with regard to violence against the environment and large-scale substitution of primeval nature for artificial environments (as also discussed in Puura 2002, 2013[2002]) and implies that

³ The article was originally published under the title "*К проблеме типологии культуры*" ["Problems in the typology of culture"] available in Russian in *Sign Systems Studies* (Lotman 1967).

⁴ Perry's article, entitled "After temporality", can be accessed at <https://www.ribbonfarm.com/2017/02/02/after-temporality/>.

the notion of semiocide can come in handy in taking the field of semiotics from just a logical or conceptual approach towards a more ethical approach (Tønnessen *et al.* 2015: 5).

In a more negative light, Frayne (2018: 277) maintains that semiocide constitutes severing the relationships in an ecological community and argues that semiocide occurs because “modern technological society entails a transition from a living to a physical environment and, consequently, from an open to a closed ontic system”. In line with Tønnessen’s ethical concerns, Maran (2020: 31) believes that “deterioration of ecosystems is thus accompanied by semiocide and loss of signscapes for various animals that are processes much harder to detect”. In other words, the sign-centred hegemony of non-human animals over nature has paved the way for destruction of ecosystems by reducing nature to nothing but abstract values. A similar understanding of semiocide is also provided in Hendlin 2023. For Wheeler (2020: 529), “semiocide – of nature-culture similarities and differences – is a puritanical war not only on representation and art, [...] it is a silencing war on past, present and future, on what links them, and the great gift of life”.

On two rare occasions where the concept of semiocide was utilized beyond the capacity of bio- and ecosemiotics, Hendlin (2019: 5) used the concept to argue that replacing territory-based signs with abstract and hypostatic ones without local materiality – similar to what, in his conception, happens in propaganda – is a type of semiocide; and Sodr  (2017 cited in Silva 2020: 4) discusses the ontological semiocide perpetrated by evangelical Christianity, which served as a prelude to genocide. Along this line, this paper endeavours to uproot semiocide from its biosemiotic haunt and channel it further into a more socio-political scholarly milieu.

1.2. Developing the concept of semiocide

Only as few as three scholarly works that have contemplated the concept of semiocide in and of itself have come to my knowledge. The first of these three is Timo Maran’s article in remembrance of the concept’s intellectual father Ivar Puura. Maran (2013: 147) pioneered the use of the concept as a theoretical lens, writing: “Semiocide has the potential to become a useful theoretical concept for describing relationships between cultures as well as between culture and nature, and for distinguishing specific practices applied in these relationships.” He adds that semiocide as a theoretical concept can come in handy for studying not only the relationships between cultures but also between culture and nature – “Semiocide can take place in a situation in which one’s own semiotic sphere is actively aggressive towards the other semiotic sphere” (Maran 2013: 147). The (un)intentionality

of semiocidal acts is another feature of the concept that Maran comments on, arguing that “intentional semiocide requires planning and awareness of the other’s semioticity, being thus foremost a capacity of the human species”, whereas “unintentional semiocide is often part of our relations with other species” (Maran 2013: 148).

The second contribution in this regard is Mehmet Uslu’s effort from 2020 to take the concept in a more “positive” direction. Inspired by Paul Connerton’s notion of ‘prescriptive forgetting’, considering which “we should entertain doubts about our deeply held conviction that forgetting involves a loss” (Connerton 2008: 62), Uslu (2020: 224) believes semiocide can be “a potential avenue for emancipatory praxis”. Accusing Puura of being conservative in his initial definition of semiocide, Uslu (2020: 227) argues that semiocide should not be labelled as destructive at all times and emphasizes that “we should make allowances for situations in which the destructive aspects of a *status quo* are the object of semiocide and actions against them, albeit potentially intentional, should be subject to analysis without being categorized as malevolence” (Uslu 2020: 233).

This is followed by Fatehi’s (2022) development of Puura’s dichotomy of “malevolence or carelessness” (see Fig. 1).

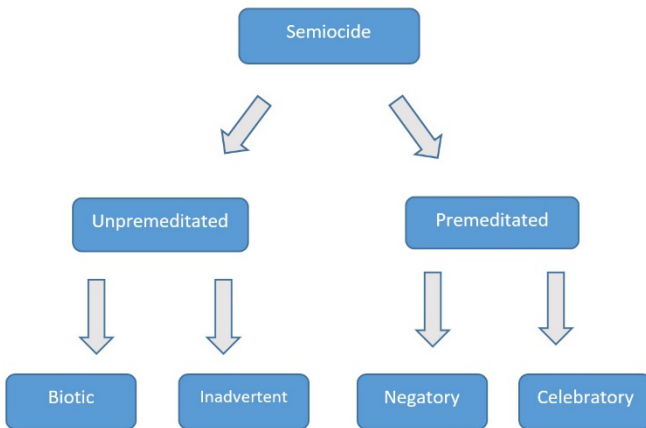


Figure 1. A taxonomy of semiocide (Fatehi 2022).

On one side of the dichotomy, Fatehi (2022: 12) argues, is unpremeditated semiocide which “can occur [...] either as part of the inner workings of nature (biotic) or due to perpetrators’ not being aware of the implications of their

actions (inadvertent)”. An example of biotic semicide is the destruction of natural semiotic affordances associated with a particular species by another species, for instance, in pursuit of more resources. A case in point regarding inadvertent semicide is the study by Forman and Alexander (1998), which focused on the debilitating effects of human traffic noise on the vocal communication of birds, which resulted in incapacitating their communication signs. On the other side of the dichotomy (the specifically political and human-centred side) is premeditated semicide which can occur in two orders: “‘celebratory’ (where the agents of semicide exude triumphalism) and ‘negatory’ (where the agents endeavor to blot out their practices)” (Fatehi 2022: 13, original emphasis). An example of celebratory semicide is the triumphalist discourse maintained by some of the perpetrators, still present at the site of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia. An example of negatory semicide can be found in the case of the Armenian genocide in the Ottoman Empire where the Turkish side has tried to reduce the genocide to a civil war (Armenians taking arms against their own government), minimize the number of victims and call the claim of systematic attacks against Armenians into question (Fatehi 2022: 14).

Nevertheless, semicide as a concept could be afforded more development and application. Three points of departure for future studies and applications of semicide can thus be imagined as follows:

(1) It can be beneficial to try to re-examine Puura’s dichotomy of “malevolence or carelessness”. It seems that in some semicidal practices, the agents of semicide are aware of the destructive consequences, yet they either refrain from or disinterestedly proceed with the action in the face of a master signifier. For instance, during the 1994 Rwandan genocide, the Belgian colonialists did not directly engage in the massacre of Tutsis, yet they had knowledge of it happening, and despite being able to stop the genocide, they passively observed it happening due to the master signifier of ‘national interest’. This situation goes beyond Puura’s dichotomy and can be explained by the psychoanalytic concept of ‘disavowal’ which “permits the maintenance of two contradictory ideas without the one’s influencing the other” (Bass 2002: 20) and allows “an unusual degree of conviction about the reality of a reassuring idea” (Renik 1992: 545). Žižek (2009: 12) formulates this (fetishistic) disavowal as: “I know very well [...] but nevertheless [...]”.

(2) The notion of semicide can be approached as a mechanism of what Jeffrey Olick (2007: 122) names “politics of regret”, i.e. a “variety of practices with which many contemporary societies confront toxic legacies of the past”. In situations where the opposite of what Connerton (2008: 67) calls “humiliated silence” of post-1945 German society happens, instead of embracing moral burdens of the

toxic past, a form of semiocide is practised to blot out meaningful signs and stories that would testify to the atrocities of the past.

(3) Puura's definition must not lead to the misconception that semiocide constitutes total destruction, disappearance or obliteration of signs and meaningful stories. One lesson to be learned from Peircean semiotics is the idea that interpretant is itself determined by a particular sign resulting in infinite semiosis (CP 5.484). In other words, signs never cease to exist – the signified works in its turn as a signifier for a further signified.⁵ This quality of sign imperishability explains the often-discussed contradiction between the power exercised by dominant groups and the proportional cultural autonomy of subordinate groups. Further, incapacitating full-on semiosis can be a form of semiocide (if not the only form). This can occur when a hegemonic power pushes a subordinate cultural group into the peripheries of semiosphere (to borrow Lotman's terminology) in an effort to get in the way of semiosis and production (or preserving) of meaning.

2. The Baha'is of Iran: Swinging on the pendulum of violence and semiocide

Violence has remained a concept that resists easy definition for scholars of different disciplines and fields. Zygmunt Bauman (1995: 139) has correctly noted that there is something about violence that makes it elude all conceptual nets and that almost every scholar attempting to explore the phenomenon of violence finds the concept either under-, or over-defined, or both. One of the key words in Puura's initial definition of semiocide is 'violence' and this makes it essential to come to grips with the phenomenon of violence in any research around semiocide.

That being said, it is also essential to transcend the reductionist, yet fairly common, hermeneutic understanding of violence as a disagreeable surplus of human experience and it being a zero-sum kind of an exception to the rule. One risk connected with trying to squeeze the concept of violence into a single definition is the danger of unwittingly assisting habitualization (to borrow Berger and Luckmann's terminology; see Berger, Luckmann 1991) of non-direct forms of violence and allying with powerful modern constellations of violence – the constellations that more often than not are theorized through the semantic binary of *potestas* and *violentia*.

The initial step for avoiding the above-mentioned pitfall is to approach violence as "everyday knowledge" aside from acknowledging the fact that the very language

⁵ This idea is reincarnated in the writings of Umberto Eco ('unlimited semiosis'), Jacques Lacan ('the sliding signified'), Jacques Derrida ('indefinite referral' and 'freeplay') and some other post-structuralist thinkers.

in which one articulates violence is not free from violence itself – remembering Pierre Bourdieu who laid stress on how language and practices of symbolic violence are entwined (Bourdieu 1991: 40–42, 52). This is where socio-semiotics can be employed to “defamiliarize the familiar and familiarize the unfamiliar” (to use the words of Bauman 2011: 171) in terms of understanding violence.

Without this approach to violence, gaining a clear understanding of ‘mental violence’ contained in Puura’s definition of semiocide would be out of the question. For Berger and Luckmann (1991: 71), habitualized phenomena become “embedded as routines in his general stock of knowledge” prior to becoming institutionalized by different types of actors. This explains why the indirect and so-called non-headline-worthy patterns of violence do not enjoy as much spotlight as its explosive, physical and direct forms – because they have insidiously become part of general stock of knowledge. Bourdieu (1999: 126) describes this form of violence as ‘symbolic violence’ – violence that comes to pass with the silent consent of those whom it afflicts, while Žižek explains it through his dichotomy of ‘subjective violence’ and ‘objective violence’. What Žižek (2008: 2) means by subjective violence is violence which “is experienced as such against the background of a non-violent zero level. It is seen as a perturbation of the ‘normal’, peaceful state of things.” This is the kind of violence that enjoys airtime, which Žižek finds symptomatic and suspicion-rising. By objective violence, Žižek (2008: 2) means “the violence inherent to this ‘normal’ state of things. Objective violence is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent.” Objective violence tends to go unaddressed and is an example of a habitualized phenomenon described above. This understanding of violence must be brought into the equation of semiocide, which can incorporate various manifestations of violence including the ‘threat of violence’ present in the original definition of semiocide.

Since the inception of Baha’ism in Iran in 1844, its followers and leaders have suffered different forms of violence and persecution. The three cardinal figures of the Baha’i faith, i.e. the Báb (the messianic founder of Bábism who prophesied the emergence of the Baha’i prophet Bahá’u’lláh), Bahá’u’lláh and his son Abdu’l-Bahá experienced extensive punitive measures. The Báb faced execution by firing squad, while Bahá’u’lláh and his son Abdu’l-Bahá spent much of their lives in imprisonment and exile. However, the persecution of Iranian Baha’is saw an unprecedented severity after the 1979 Islamic revolution.⁶

⁶ It is not possible to determine the exact number of Baha’is in Iran, but according to various sources, including the CIA World Factbook and a 2019 United Nations report on “Situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran”, it is estimated that the Baha’i community in Iran has a population of around 300,000 to 350,000 individuals, which makes them the largest

Even though the Pahlavi regime never took concrete measures to safeguard Baha'i rights in Iran (in order not to confront the socio-politically influential *ulema*), it seems that the circumstances for the Iranian Baha'is before the Islamic revolution were less difficult. For instance, a few Baha'i-born individuals occupied some of the most significant government posts during the Pahlavi regime – examples of this are Amir Abbas Hoveyda, who served as the Iranian prime minister between 1965 and 1977, and Parviz Sabeti, who was a top executive in the regime's very powerful secret police (Khoshnood, Sanyal 2019: 212).

Due to the vitriolic rhetoric of the leader of the revolution Ruhollah Khomeini against the Baha'is, violence and persecution against this community started in the early days of the revolution and the first instance of semiocidal violence happened in less than a year since the revolution by bulldozing the house of the Báb (a site of pilgrimage for the Baha'is) in the city of Shiraz. Khomeini characterized the Baha'is of Iran as Zionists in disguise, alleging that they had infiltrated Iran to undermine its economy and independence (Zabihi-Moghaddam 2016: 128). He dismissed the Baha'i faith as lacking any religious essence, instead portraying the Baha'i community in Iran as a group of Jewish origin with no religious legitimacy (Yazdani 2012: 599). Further, in response to U.S. President Ronald Reagan's May 1983 plea against the execution of approximately 20 Baha'is, Khomeini labeled the Baha'is of Iran as spies and dismissed their faith as a political party backed by Britain and America (Zabihi-Moghaddam 2016: 130). Constant threats, spraying hate speech on Baha'is' private residences and the humiliations inflicted on Baha'is (Vahman 2019: 147–264) on the one hand, and arbitrary arrests, mass imprisonment, torture and execution (Zabihi-Moghaddam 2016: 130–132), on the other, have forced the Baha'i community to live their restricted lives with constant fear and pressure.

Quite understandably, the majority of the literature produced on the denied rights of the Baha'i community in Iran revolves around the structural violence against this community. For instance, Yazdani (2018) reviews a leaked confidential government memorandum ratified by the supreme leader of Iran in 1991, which was exposed by Renaldo Galindo Pohl, the then U.N. Human Rights Commission's special representative on Iran, in 1993.⁷ The memorandum calls for eradication of the Baha'i community as a viable entity, and for more forms of indirect violence.

religious minority in Iran. Based on the same UN report, nearly 200 Baha'i individuals have been executed by the Islamic regime in Iran since 1979.

⁷ The memorandum in its entirety can be accessed at:

<https://iranbahaipersecution.bic.org/index.php/archive/supreme-revolutionary-cultural-councils-secret-memo-dealing-bahais>.

According to Galtung (1969: 171), structural violence causes harm by building violence into the structure through institutionalized inequality and unequal power relations resulting in unequal life chances. “Deny them employment if they identify themselves as Baha’is”⁸, “They can be enrolled in schools provided they have not identified themselves as Baha’is”, “They must be expelled from universities, either in the admission process or during the course of their studies, once it becomes known that they are Baha’is”, “A plan must be devised to confront and destroy their cultural roots”, “The government’s dealings with them must be in such a way that their progress and development are blocked” are some extracts from the memorandum that testify to the structural violence inflicted upon Iranian Baha’is.

3. Three faces of semiocide against the Baha’is in Iran

Semiocide is less a product than a process in which some sign systems work towards the suppression of other sign systems. Rather than enumerating hegemonic practices and manifestations, it may be more beneficial to ask what meaning-making codes establish the plausibility of the hegemonic discourses of certain sign systems over others.

In this regard, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s mode of thought on hegemony can be the master tool in the theoretical toolbox. When a particular social demand attributed to a particular entity is articulated in a more universal fashion to bind together diverse groups and interests under a shared political umbrella, from Laclau and Mouffe’s (1987: 80, 141, 235) perspective a “chain of equivalence” is formed. This chain of equivalence constructed around “anti-imperialism” during the events leading to the 1979 Islamic Revolution, succeeded in uniting different involved groups, mainly Islamists, leftists, and nationalists, who then saw their individual struggles as part of a broader political project against the “puppet regime of Pahlavi” (of course each with their own particular interpretation of ‘anti-imperialism’ due to its being a floating signifier).

The articulation – as the discursive connection of heterogeneous demands which makes the “emergence of people” possible (Laclau 2005: 73–74) – of these different demands through a charismatic religious leader, i.e. Ruhollah Khomeini, served as the stepping stone to later theocratic hegemony and paved the way for Islam turning into a nodal point. A nodal point orders the discourse around the pivot of a privileged signifier (in this case Shia Islam), and for Laclau and Mouffe

⁸ This has put Baha’i individuals in an unfortunate plight as their faith forbids them to lie about their religious affiliation.

(1987: 28) “to ‘hegemonize’ a content would therefore amount to fixing its meaning around a nodal point”. In order for nodal points to activate the hegemony mechanisms (cultural hegemony in the case of this paper), a particular semiosphere (comprised of language, cultural identity, etc.) needs to not only generate but also maintain its own codes through internal communication, and reach a specific cultural meta-language and self-description, which Lotman (1977: 99–101) calls ‘autocommunication’. The stage of self-description is a necessary response to the threat of too much diversity within the semiosphere and the risk of disintegration (Lotman 1990: 128).

Such a self-reflexive communication (‘I’-‘I’ communication and not ‘I’-‘s/he’ communication) by a particular culture inevitably results in that culture hegemonically excluding a part of itself as something incongruous or non-existent. One of the cultural incongruencies in the autocommunicated image of the post-revolutionary Iran as a homogenous Muslim revolutionary nation consisted in religious minorities that were divergent from the privileged signifiers crystallized by post-revolutionary nodal points. Among these religious minorities, the Baha’i community suffered the most hostility because of the historical animosity attired up by the *ulema*, and this community not falling into the category of ‘People of the Book’. In order to fight against this incongruency, establish dominance over it and possibly fully eradicate it, semiocidal measures have been taken on different levels, which will be discussed in the following sections.

3.1. Epistemic semicide

As mentioned above, semicide can by no means constitute total evaporation of meaningful signs. It can occur if production or sustenance of signs as such is hegemonically hindered or reduced to the most minimal of levels. “Blocking Baha’i progress and development” as stated in the 1991 memorandum discloses the Iranian regime’s scheme to drive the Baha’is from the core of the semiosphere to the peripheries. Of course, each semiosphere, in and of itself, is a hierarchical entity where the grammar of the cultural dialect in the nucleus of the semiosphere has been striving to be extended over the whole semiosphere (Lotman 1990: 128). This pushing of a group (in this case Iranian Baha’is) into the margins of a semiosphere creates epistemic violence based on the hierarchy of who has the power to speak and who does not (the subaltern group).

For Gayatri Spivak, the silencing of the subaltern happens through a process of ‘epistemic violence’. This is to say that the hegemonic discourse and knowledge production processes not only exclude but also strive to obliterate the voices, experiences, and pieces of knowledge of the subaltern group (Spivak 1988:

280–283). Thereby, the subaltern, as a group stripped of its right to speak, are not only hegemonized economically and politically but their collective existence and their avenues of knowing and being known are denied by the dominant culture. The ‘knowledge of the other’ and ‘the knowledge about the other’ are both exerted influence on. Not only every possibility of making meaning or sustenance of meaning (any form of written or oral public communication, producing knowledge, the possibility of practising rituals, organizing events, etc.) is eliminated but there is an ongoing stigmatic semiotization of the Baha’i community (as morally corrupt, spies working for Zionists, etc.) coming from the discourse generated in the core of the semiosphere. A 2011 report⁹ by Baha’i International Community analysed over 400 press and media pieces across a span of 16 months, underscoring a covert state-backed campaign to denigrate and defame Baha’is through baseless allegations, provocative language, and offensive imagery. In a more recent twist on the name-calling tactic, state-run media outlets have fabricated the term ‘the political organization of Baha’ism’¹⁰ to refer to the Baha’i Faith. The intention is to paint a misleading picture that the Baha’i Faith is devoid of any spiritual essence and is merely a politically driven entity with power-seeking ambitions.

Counter-storytelling, a form of resistance that has its roots in critical race theory, is a method of communicating the experiences of those whose experiences are not told (Solórzano, Yosso 2002: 32). However, in exerting absolute control over the Baha’i community, imprisoning Baha’i activists and scholars, and quelling any discourse that shows sympathy towards the Baha’is of Iran (see Iran Human Rights Documentation Center 2006), the regime has succeeded in undermining their capacity to question the epistemic validity of the prevailing narratives. Consequently, the communication of counternarratives remains largely confined to voices emanating from outside Iran’s borders.

Additionally, from a Bourdieusian perspective, pushing the oppressed into the fringes of semiosphere can have semiocidal ramifications. That is to say, on a more subjective level, systematically depriving the Baha’i community of social capital (denying them social networks outside their community and institutional relationships) and cultural capital (denying them higher education and access to high culture) is a semiocidal measure in that it can empty the community from individuals who are able to uphold meaningful signs, transfer meaningful stories or help to resist the destruction of these signs. Overall, epistemic violence pushes

⁹ The report titled *Inciting Hatred: Iran’s Media Campaign to Demonize Baha’is* can be accessed in its entirety at http://dl.bahai.org/bwns/assets/documentlibrary/861_Inciting-Hatred_BIC_Report_Web_111024.pdf.

¹⁰ An article by this title can be found on Fars News, the largest state-run news agency in Iran, at <https://www.farsnews.ir/news/14010512000235>.

the Baha'i community to a peripheral position with very limited (or supposedly uninfluential) semiosis.

3.2. Cultural genocide

Like any other offshoot concept, cultural genocide enjoys many understandings and extensions. In a broad-brush manner, it can be understood as “the destruction of those cultural structures of existence that give people a sense of holistic and communal integrity” (Tinker 1993: 6). Damien Short (2016: 3) considers it a method that leads to the destruction of a social group through the destruction of their culture, and Lawrence Davidson (2012: 1) suggests that any practice of cultural genocide involves a “process of conquest or domination”. Such understanding of cultural genocide makes it easily identifiable as a semiocidal practice. Acts of cultural genocide also seem like an uncomplicated solution for the powerful entities perpetrating semiocide, as it only demands blatant expressions of power and violence, skirting the subtleties of epistemic and indirect mechanisms.

State-sponsored campaigns to destroy meaningful Baha'i signs and stories have a historical background in Iran and have involved violence on material and non-material Baha'i culture, complete cessation of all Baha'i administrative bodies and community activities and institutions, as well as (efforts towards) ethnic cleansing. Denying of the existence of the Baha'is of Iran advanced to such a level that in the mid-1950s the Iranian delegation to the United Nations asserted that there were no Baha'is in Iran (Fischer 2003: 187). However, the more aggressive attempts of semiocide against the Baha'i community in post-1979 Iran can be broken down into two main categories: destruction of prominent Baha'i historic and holy sites, and destruction of major Baha'i cemeteries.

As for the former, the following cases can be taken into consideration: (1) destruction of the house of The Báb in Shiraz in 1979; (2) destruction of the house of Bahá'u'lláh in Takur; (3) destruction of the gravesite of Quddús, a prominent figure in early Baha'i history, in Babol in 2004; (4) destruction of the house of Mirza Abbas Nouri, father of Bahá'u'lláh, in Tehran in 2004. The holy sites mentioned above stood as a testament to the Baha'i community's historical presence in the region, and their destruction paved the way for cultural cleansing and rewriting of history. Moreover, by destroying sites central to the religious and cultural practices of the Baha'i community, perpetrators of cultural genocide aimed to disrupt these practices and further marginalize the targeted group.

The number of cases regarding destruction or desecration of major Baha'i cemeteries is extremely high, and involves virtually every Baha'i cemetery across the country. One prominent example is the 2014 destruction of a historic cemetery in

Shiraz, where approximately 950 Baha'is were buried, including ten women who had been hanged by the Revolutionary Guards in 1983 for their refusal to recant their Baha'i belief,¹¹ in order to build a new cultural and sports building on the site. The symbolic essence of cemeteries is closely tied to a cultural group's historical identity and cultural heritage, and understanding cemeteries as semiotic-laden tools for forming the socio-cultural identity of the living is crucial in cultural studies (Sautkin 2016: 661). Peter Margry (2008) explores how in the modern world burial sites function as significant cultural landmarks and pilgrimage sites for different social groups, integrating memory, identity, and community. The semiocidal nature of the practices described above is not only limited to the destruction of cultural landscapes. Such measures are intended to cut off Baha'i individuals from their past, dismantle any potential place of communion (which can be used to sustain Baha'i sign systems and help transfer meaningful signs and stories to the future generation), and forestall any manifestation of ritualistic or symbolic behaviour.

3.3. Subjective violence and semiocidal pogroms

Subjective violence, as conceptualized in contemporary discourse (defined above), is clearly manifested in the experiences of the Baha'i community in Iran. Subjective violence against individuals might seem counterintuitive in semicide-related discussions; however, the term 'Baha'i' has become a sign with a connotative meaning (or a 'myth', to use Roland Barthes' term) in post-1979 Iran. For this reason, any instance of subjective violence against Baha'i citizens is thought of as an attack on this mythologized sign and not necessarily on the individual. To provide an example, in 1982, armed intruders forced an entry into the private residence of a Baha'i citizen, Askar Muhammadi, in the village of Rahimkhani and shot him in the back. Facing up to the victim's brother as they were taking leave, the murderers averred that: "He was a Baha'i, and to kill a Baha'i is a good deed for devout Muslims."¹²

A critical framework for understanding this nuanced form of violence can be found in Giorgio Agamben's conceptualization of *Homo Sacer* (Agamben 1998: 1–2). Agamben distinguishes between 'Zoe', the ordinary form of life, and 'Bios', a form of qualified life that differentiates one from another. In Agamben's terms (1998: 4, 8, 188), '*Homo Sacer*' refers to an individual who, bereft of legal and

¹¹ <https://news.bahai.org/story/994/> and https://www.huffpost.com/entry/bahai-cemetery-iran-destroyed_n_5323286.

¹² The quotation is taken from *The Baha'i Question: Cultural Cleansing in Iran* (2008: 49) which is the Baha'i International Community's informational booklet.

political rights, is left vulnerable to the potential violence of the state and resides in an exceptional space, a state of existence termed ‘bare life’. In other words, a *Homo Sacer* “remains included in politics in the form of the exception, that is, as something that is included solely through an exclusion” (Agamben 1998: 11). The aggression towards the Baha’i community effectively strips them of ‘Bios’, reducing them to their most fundamental biological functions, and creating a ‘bare life’. The impunity evident in the attacks on Iranian Baha’is reflects this precarious existence. In 2017, the Persian service of the BBC reported¹³ on a case where the murderers of a Baha’i citizen in the city of Yazd in central Iran were released after they revealed to the officials that they had slain their victim only because of his Baha’i faith. This is only one example among many where the attack (with impunity) on the ‘bare lives’ of Iranian Baha’is has been treated like an attack on a mythologized signifier and therefore ignored by legal structures.

This incident among others indicates that by means of reducing the life of victims to a life of ‘Zoe’ and stripping them of their shared cultural identity, the victims are reduced to ‘bare lives’ whose exclusion becomes the manifestation of the autocommunicated culture and a pure ‘us’ – an inclusion through exclusion. In semiotic terms, a ‘bare life’ is a sign-ified life (i.e. a life turned into a sign) with a connotative meaning. The Baha’i community in Iran are *homo-sacer*-ized beings whose sign-ified existence is concurrently confined by legal structures and still not protected by them. This is a position outside the realm of moral obligations, wherein they can be attacked, killed or injured by anyone (i.e. effaced semiotically).

The violence inflicted on the Baha’is extends beyond the notion of subjective violence, manifesting in the form of semiocidal pogroms. Pogroms are, in essence, violently organized attacks against minority groups. Etymologically, the term comes from the Russian word ‘*pogromit*’, which means ‘to wreak havoc’. The word emerged out of a series of attacks against Jews in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Russia (Fitzgerald 2008: 10). Pogroms are not necessarily semiocidal acts as they can have various motivations. However, they become semiocidal in nature when they ritualize collective actions to purify the land from incongruous signs – signs that are incompatible with the autocommunicated image of the attackers as representatives of the core of a particular semiosphere. Attacks on private residences and properties of Bahai’s in Iran have happened on many occasions, but pogroms have been rare. In recorded cases when pogroms have occurred against

¹³ The original report, in Persian, can be found here: <https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-40269097>. Coverage of the same incidence in Euro News and Voice of America: <https://per.euronews.com/2016/10/27/iran-bahai-murdered> and <https://ir.voanews.com/a/iran-bahaei-yazd-/3568061.html>.

Iranian Baha'is, such as the case of August 1852, they have either been orchestrated or sponsored by the state (Affolter 2005: 75).

The case of the 1983 pogrom against the Baha'is of Ivel village in Sari in Northern Iran provides an illustration of a pogrom as semiocidal act where anything 'Baha'i' was considered – in Peirce's (EP 2: 383) terms – “a contradictory sign” to the privileged master signifier. Contrary to other instances of pogroms in history, in this case there seemed to be no blind violence against the victims who were only seen as annoyingly contrasting signs and would have been forgiven, had they converted to Islam. One of the victims recounted how the assailants chanted “either Islam or leave!”¹⁴ Also, dairy cows belonging to Baha'i households were separated from those of Muslim households because they were seen as signs of impurity.¹⁵

Conclusion

In conclusion, the concept of semiocide, defined as the systematic destruction or suppression of sign systems significant to a group or an individual, has been unpacked and explored in the context of the Baha'i community in Iran. It can be argued that the Baha'i community in Iran has been subjected to semiocidal violence on multiple levels, resulting in the destruction of their cultural identity and the marginalization of their community.

The exploration of semiocide in the context of the Baha'i community in Iran has revealed three distinct forms: epistemic semiocide, cultural genocide, and subjective violence. Epistemic semiocide refers to the systematic silencing and stigmatization of the Baha'i community, pushing them to the peripheries of the semiosphere and limiting their semiosis. Cultural genocide involves the destruction of Baha'i historic and holy sites and cemeteries, severing the community's connection to their past and their cultural landmarks. Subjective violence including semiocidal pogroms manifests in physical violence against Baha'i individuals, reducing them to 'bare life' and treating them as incongruous signs in the auto-communicated image of post-revolutionary Iran.

The study has also highlighted the potential of semiocide as a theoretical framework for exploring phenomena such as cultural hegemony, cultural violence, and cultural genocide. It suggests that the concept of semiocide can serve

¹⁴ The quote has been retrieved from an interview with one of the victims, an eye witness of the incident recorded in the 2011 documentary film *Iranian Taboo* directed by Reza Allamehzadeh.

¹⁵ Reza Allamehzadeh, *Iranian Taboo* (2011).

as a lens through which to examine the politics of regret, a concept proposed by Jeffrey Olick (2007), and to investigate the habitualization of non-direct forms of violence.

The exploration of semiocide in the context of the Baha'i community in Iran has underscored the need for a more inclusive understanding of violence and genocide. It has also opened up new avenues for research, suggesting that the concept of semiocide could be applied to other marginalized and persecuted communities around the world. The hope is that this exploration will inspire further research into the concept of semiocide and its implications.

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جنگ خاموش علیه نشانه‌ها: تحلیل مفهوم کشتار نشانه‌ای و پیامدهای آن بر جامعه‌ی بهایی در ایران

انواع پیچیده اما ژرفی از خشونت وجود دارند که کمتر در حوزه‌ی مطالعات خشونت و ستیز مورد بررسی قرار می‌گیرند. این مقاله به یکی از این مفاهیم کمتر توجه شده، یعنی کشتار نشانه‌ای، که به نابودی نشانه‌ها، نمادها و روایت‌های مهم و معنادار فرهنگی گفته می‌شود، می‌پردازد. با تحلیل پایه‌های نظری مفهوم کشتار نشانه‌ای، این مطالعه ماهیت متمایز ولی آگاهی‌بخش این مفهوم را مورد بررسی قرار داده و بر ظرفیت بالای این مفهوم برای استفاده از آن در مطالعات خشونت فرهنگی و مطالعات ستیز صحنه می‌گذارد. با استفاده از تحلیل محتوای منابع مختلف رسانه‌ای، این مطالعه به تجزیه و تحلیل اقدامات منجر به کشتار نشانه‌ای علیه بهائیان ایران می‌پردازد. یافته‌های این تحقیق حذف و مخدوش‌سازی سازمان‌یافته‌ی هویت فرهنگی بهائیان ایران از طریق سه ساز و کار مربوط به کشتار نشانه‌ای را نشان می‌دهد. با پرکردن خلا بین نظریه و عمل، این مطالعه درک دقیقی از کشتار نشانه‌ای ارائه می‌دهد. به علاوه، با بررسی پیچیدگی‌های خشونت فرهنگی، این مقاله به درک کامل‌تری از این پدیده و همچنین سلطه‌ی فرهنگی کمک کرده و تلاش در غنی‌تر کردن گفتار غالب در مطالعات فرهنگی، خشونت و ستیز دارد.

Vaikiv sõda märkidega. Lahates semiotsiidi mõistet ja selle implikatsioone Iraani Baha'i kogukonna jaoks

Vägivalla- ja konfliktiuuringute valdkonnas on olemas rida peeneid, ent sügavaid vägivallavorme, mis tihtipeale jäävad alakäsitletuks. Käesolevas artiklis tegeldakse semiotsiidi mõistega, mis osutab kultuuriliselt oluliste märkide, lugude, sümbolite ning narratiivide hävitamisele. Semiotsiidi teoreetiliste aluste lahkamise kaudu rõhutatakse käsitluses selle eripärast olemust ning väljavaateid edasisteks vaatlusteks kultuurivägivalla- ja konfliktiuuringute raames. Kasutades erinevatest meediaallikatest pärineva sisu analüüsi vaadeldakse uurimuses Iraani Baha'i kogukonna vastu suunatud semiotsiidseid praktikaid. Tulemused illustreerivad Baha'i kultuurilise identiteedi süstemaatilist kustutamist ning manipuleerimist kolme semiotsiidse mehhanismi abil. Tulemused heidavad valgust kultuurivägivalla keerukale dünaamikale mitte üksnes Iraani kontekstis, vaid pakuvad ühtlasi väärtuslikke implikatsioone, mõistmaks samasuguseid nähtusi teistes sotsiokultuurilistes kontekstides. Ületades lõhe teooria ja praktika vahel, pakutakse uurimuses välja semiotsiidi nüansseeritud käsitlus, mis annab panuse kultuurilise vägivalla ja kultuurihegemoonia laiemasse mõistmisesse ning rikastab seega konflikti- ja vägivaldauuringute diskursust.