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Towards a Political Theory of Semiocide

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In dedication to each and every victim of semiocide....

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“We do not know what is happening to us, and that is precisely the thing that is happening to us – the fact of not knowing what is happening to us.”

— José Ortega y Gasset (1958: 119)

Introduction

What is Semiocide?

It would be standing in the face of justice to start a discussion of ‘semiocide’ without paying homage to the person who conceptualized the notion of the death of signs and coined a term for it. Ivar Puura (1961 – 2012), a geologist by training, was mostly appreciated for his contributions the field of paleontology. His sudden passing in 2012 was a heartbreaking incident, especially for the semiotics community in Tartu because of him being an active participant in semiotic circles for around two decades (see Maran 2013). His insightful presentations such as “Time, Chronesthesia and Memory” in Tartu Autumn School of Semiotics in 2006 and “Unknown Domestication” in a 2006 conference in Tartu named “Boundaries of Semiotics” are not the only semiotic contributions he is remembered by; in fact, his name, more often than not, occurs with two semiotic coinages of his, i.e. semiocide and paleosemiotics. (see Kull 2012) In a 2002 articles titled, *Nature in Our Memory*, he wrote:

I understand semiocide to be 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. (Translated into English by Elin Sutiste and Timo Maran)

Apart from signs and their destruction, there are four key words in this definition: identity, material, mental and violence. With this knowledge in mind, the main aim of this research is to help to create room for political discourse around a concept of significant potential, i.e. semiocide and fill the socio-political gap in the existing literature.

What are the grounds for my Research?

In this section I would like to address the question which has been recurrently fired at me regarding the topic of this research: “Why would you work on that?”

Several motives converged in choosing to work on the concept of semiocide for my MA thesis:

In 2020 and 2021 I participated in two different conferences on genocide studies. These conferences were fruitful and eye-opening for me in the sense that I found the opportunity of becoming acquainted with and reading more on genocide cases other than Holocaust, such as Rwandan and Cambodian genocides, which I have turned to account in my analysis in chapter 2, and reflecting more on mechanisms and socio-cultural ramifications of genocide. However, it came to my attention that when the speakers departed from mass massacres to shed light on genocide from alternative angles, such as forgetting and identity, they sought recourse in wordy explanations and interdisciplinary references – lacking the *mot juste* for a more convenient articulation. Having previously become familiarized with the concept, I knew the *mot juste*: semiocide. In a later correspondence with one of the participants in the conference, who is a great scholar in the field and runs a podcast on genocide studies, I sent him (who would like to be anonymized) a copy of Timo Maran’s 2013 paper in remembrance of Ivar Puura. The fact that a prolific writer on genocide and identity and a well-read scholar like him had never come across the concept of semiocide surprised both me and my interlocutor. The outcome of our correspondence was to concur in the relevance of the promising concept of semiocide in genocide and violence studies and the necessity of its further expansion. It was a pity to witness the cloud of oblivion around, from my perspective, a promising concept and to this end I have tried to synthesize a comparative and analytic approach of semiotic nature with cases of genocide and a theoretical pool built up through the works of a number of socio-political thinker to further expand the concept of semiocide and help this idea reach scholars from other disciplines.

Later in this chapter will come a historiography of semiocide and as will be seen it is a relatively understudied idea. There exist only two outstanding efforts by Timo Maran and Mehmet Emir Uslu to develop this concept; other works have either made cursory use of it to get a certain point across or cited it for further reading. The term has occurred in biosemiotics-related texts a number of times, but its occurrence in socio-political texts is a rarity.

Even though socio-political and biological lines of thinking have been effectively integrated into semiotics in socio-semiotics and biosemiotics, the full potential of the semiotic legacy of psychoanalytic thinkers, Lacan in particular, is yet to be realized and there are not as many works done in this regard as done in socio-semiotics and biosemiotics. As a personal ambition to contribute to this line of thinking and in order to work towards what I believe can be a modern continental tradition of semiotics, I have modelled semiocide in a Lacanian framework in the third chapter.

Having personal contact with a number of semiocide victims and their bereaved families, as well as being a victim of political violence myself, have fostered a sense of sympathy and identification with victims of semiocide and political violence in me. The aforesaid reason and the fact that speaking of some of the semiocide cases discussed in this research is prohibited in their place of occurrence, I wished to take advantage of this opportunity to say the unsayable.

The sheer importance of studying violence, its roots and the motives that drive it perpetrators. The very first review I received in a public meeting regarding my research was “Why have you chosen to work on such a violent subject? You must declare dissociation from such violence and anger.” Such comments I believe come from what Herbert Marcuse has named *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) who is a by-product and therefore an apologist for steamrollers of discourse, prevalent subjugation of thought behind a veil of political correctness, public consensus and fighting shy of the uncomfortable. In Marcuse’s words, “Thus emerges a pattern of one-dimensional thought and behavior in which ideas, aspirations, and objectives that, by their content, transcend the established universe of discourse and action are either repelled or reduced” (ibid 14). First and foremost, we need to draw a distinction between anger and violence. Violence is adding ‘evil’ to the universe and human experience – generating an actuality that harms the other. The problem of violence is generating the destruction of the other, whereas anger is swallowing and internalizing the ‘evils’ of human experience – swallowing the unbearable. The problem of anger is the struggle of self and the human experience of existence. Although anger has the potential to become blind, strip its subject of its ability of discernment and devolve into violence, it can be an agent of change for the better. Anger is a pure human response, similar to other human emotions such as affection, tears and laughter, to the surrounding world, and I believe it is substantial to standing up against the current generation of actualities that destroy and harm. We live in a world

with daily headlines on violence against minorities, women, migrants, neurodivergents and non-human animals and, as unsettling as it is to articulate and think about for some, the agents of such instances of violence are by and large common people who are not by any means demographically and psychologically anomalous compared to the rest of the population. To quote Heinrich Popitz “a human never has to, but can always act violently, he never has to, but can always kill—individually or collectively—together or with division of labor—in all situations . . . in different moods . . . for all imaginable ends—anyone” (Popitz 1986: 76 in Williams 2020: 3). For a one-dimensional man, migrant crisis only materializes when the refugees are right at the border and a look at the root causes of this phenomenon – mostly violence – is unsettling and outside the reinforced boundaries of the established universe of discourse. This research is, in fact, an antithesis of any line of thinking that condones violence of any form. Here is a note to the individuals whose question of “why would you study that?” comes with an underlying tone of distaste and doubt, tinged with suspicion: as Christopher Browning once aptly put it “What I do not accept, however, are the old clichés that to explain is to excuse, to understand is to forgive. Explaining is not excusing; understanding is not forgiving (1994: XVIII).

Against this background, the main question I have tried to answer in this research is: what precedes and follows semiocide? In this context, I have addressed the following (all of which can be read as questions):

Different Forms of Semiocide

The Interplay between (politicized) Memory, identity and Semiocide

Semiotic Exclusion and its Mechanisms Associated with Semiocidal Practices

The Outcome of Semiocide as a Political Strategy

Historiography

Destruction of what is collectively or individually important – be it identity, material and non-material culture, etc. and how this done – by means of systemic forgetting, violence, etc. is by no means new content for discussion. It has been discussed far and wide by many scholars in genocide studies, culturology, anthropology and so forth. However, what makes Ivar Puura's case noteworthy for the purposes of this research is that he conceptualized it semiotically and spoke of destruction of signs (Puura 2002). The original text where the concept of semiocide was introduced for the first time was written in Estonian – titled “Loodus meie mälus” [ENG: Nature in Our Memory] – and published in *Eesti Loodus* [ENG: Estonian Nature]. This text was posthumously translated into English by Elin Sutiste and Timo Maran and published in *Sign System Studies* in the year 2013 as an annex to Maran's article in memory of Ivar Puura titled “Enchantment of the past and semiocide. Remembering Ivar Puura”. Before this article, Kalevi Kull had composed a semiotic biography of Ivar Puura following his sudden passing in the year 2012 in *Acta Semiotica Estica*. An absence of a conceptual framework and topic-based studies dedicated to this so-called ‘dark’ or flipside of semiotics is easily noticeable. In fact, a search of the term semiocide in the Corpus of Contemporary American English show zero results for the term and a search in iWeb Corpus only shows one result and directs us to an e-article by Sarah Perry on the topic of ‘Temporality’¹ where she has simply defined the term with a reference to the aforementioned article by Puura to suggest how semiocide can be adopted as tactic to shape both simulated and temporal futures. There are only two works written specifically about the concept of semiocide trying to develop it. The first being Maran (2013: 147) where he writes “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.” His argument is that the nature of the relationship between semiotic spheres can be classified based on attitude, level of activity and intentionality, and semiocide occurs when ne semiotic sphere is met with hostility by the other (ibid). He also touches upon the intentionality and unintentionality of semiocide, based on Puura's initial definition, which will be expanded later in chapter 1 of this research. The second work done in an effort to expand on the concept of

¹ The full article can be found at <https://www.ribbonfarm.com/2017/02/02/after-temporality/>

semiocide is Uslu (2020) where the author has strived to depart from ‘dark’ interpretations of semiocide and demonstrate its potential for emancipatory practices – “Acts of destruction open up spaces for new relations to be formed” (ibid: 243) – which he argues can occur by an overhaul of the ‘carelessness’ and malevolence’ in Puura’s initial definition. Another author who has found the idea of semiocide to be interesting is Morten Tønnessen. In his 2015 contribution to a collection on biosemiotic perspectives on language, titled “Umwelt and Language” he tried to bring semiocide and language together arguing “Language is relevant here for two reasons. First, because when languages are going extinct, semiocide occurs and, second, because language can make us blind to the ongoing non-linguistic semiocide” (94). In addition, he, along with his co-authors, has brought up semiocide in the context of ethical responsibilities of semiotics (Tønnessen et al 2015). Replacing the extended correlates of thought and reference with a substitute set of characters without local materiality does commit, in a sense, semiocide. Hendlin (2019: 5) points out to a unique characteristic of advertising, including propaganda, which is “replacement of territory-based signs with abstract and hypostatic ones.” With this, he has brought semiocide into a realm in which it had never been discussed before: Advertising-based Artificial Selection. In this regard, he argues, “replacing the extended correlates of thought and reference with a substitute set of characters without local materiality does commit, in a sense, semiocide” (ibid). For Wheeler (2020: 529) imagination constitutes distinctions, which, for her, is indispensable for life itself and she considers “the attempted erasure of distinctions, and the judgements they carry” to be a semiocidal act and the greatest contemporary danger to life. She argues “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” (ibid). In the same vein, and from an eco-semiotics perspective, Maran (2020) explains how the symbolic so-called hegemony of non-human animals have worked towards the subjugation of nature and reducing it to abstract values and measures, which is conducive to sabotaging ecosystems and their constituents. For him, “deterioration of ecosystems is thus accompanied by semiocide and loss of signscapes for various animals that are processes much harder to detect” (Maran 2020: 31). As can be seen, the majority of semiocide-related discussions have occurred in biosemiotic publications and a socio-political vintage point is conspicuous by its absence. One of the aims of my research is to help fill this gap.

Semiocide as a Buried Treasure for Other Disciplines

Even though the term semiocide has not been bandied around like other more famous semiotic concepts, there has long been a tacit and unacknowledged use of the idea – not using the exact vocabulary – in genocide and violence studies, legal studies, sociology, archaeology, human rights, colonial studies, and anthropology. The assimilation processes imposed on indigenous communities, the joint effort made by colonial powers to exclude cultural genocide from Genocide Convention, materiality, cultural hegemony, globalization and ideological over-coding are, just to name a few, relevant topics in these field that can be studied from a semiocidal point of view. The field I would like to focus here, in line with Puura’s definition that includes “material or mental violence”, is cultural genocide. This is because I believe semiocide sits perfectly well with the works and case studies done by the scholars in this field, and I would like to bring the attention of cultural genocide researchers to the concept of semiocide for their future research. Adam Jones (2006: 15 – 18) lists two dozen definitions of genocide only two of which refer to cultural factors. There is a heated debate around the concept of cultural genocide, as some deny such a concept, however, there are two definitions of the concept that I believe clear the haze around it and make room for its understanding from a semiotic perspective. According to Damien Short (in Bachman 2019: 5) cultural genocide is “a method of genocide which destroys a social group through the destruction of their culture.” An alternative yet very similar definition at its core is “purposeful destructive targeting of out-group cultures so as to destroy or weaken them in the process of conquest or domination” (Davidson 2012 in Bachman 2019: 5). How can semiotic methodology come in handy here? First of all, the notion of culture, in the above-mentioned definitions and others in this regard, is very well in line with the holistic understanding of culture in semiotics of culture (heterogeneity, asymmetry, binarism, etc.). Second, these definitions suggest that when a particular incident of cultural genocide occurs two semiospheres – semiotic space of meaning-making – (to borrow Juri Lotman’s 2005 terminology) clash. Semiosphere can serve as a useful method in studying the process, the aggressor and the victim in cultural genocide. “Semiosphere is a creation or a construct of semiotic method” (Kull, 2005). Third and most importantly, what sets cultural genocide from genocide is the semiocidal aspect of it. Researchers of cultural genocide tend to underscore the fact that genocide does not necessarily come with direct physical violence or mass massacres. In other words, it is the destruction of what is meaningful for an out-

group putting their collective identity and stories on the line. There is a close affinity between Jeffrey Bachman's (2019), the editor of the most comprehensive book published on cultural genocide to this day, exposition of cultural genocide and Puura's definition of semiocide, the former clarifying it with the phrase "indirect violence" and the latter with "mental violence". Furthermore, when we speak of cultural genocide, we are referring to one or more of the following:

- 1) semiotic regimes that attempt to eradicate existing sign systems (for instance by demolishing cultural institutions or even individuals which/who are necessary for conserving cultural identity, socio-cultural cohesion or transferring the stories to future generations)
- 2) semiotic regimes that attempt to replace existing signs systems (for instance by renaming or taking over pre-existing cultural observances like what Christians did with already-existing dates for pagan celebrations)
- 3) semiotic regimes that attempt to homologize existing sign systems (for instance by systemic creolization of language or regulating native customs and traditions).

Having said that, there is one common ground in all of three culturally genocidal processes mentioned above: an attack on the signs that are important for a particular semiosphere and its inhabitants, i.e. semiocide.

Following an orientational prelude to the concept of semiocide in the introduction section, chapter 1, adopting a socio-semiotic approach, will introduce a taxonomy of semiocide before proposing 'credocide' (within the study of a case in contemporary Iran) as a form of semiocide and discussing the interplay between memory and semiocide. In chapter 2, the synergic interrelationship among identity, violence and exclusion in the context of semiocide will be discussed, after which a quintuple model of semiotic exclusion in respect to practices of semiocide will be introduced. This will be done by means of a semiotic characterization of exclusion and clarification of exclusionary mechanisms within the scope of semiocide. In the 3rd chapter, psychoanalytic methods in the realm of politics and their relevance to semiotics will be addressed. In addition, in the same chapter, a psychoanalytic model of semiocide will be presented in line with the author's conception of semiocide as a discursive semiosis, which in turn will illustrate whether there actually is an endpoint to semiocidal practices (what comes next) or not.

1. Politics, Memory and Semiocide

1.1 Semiocide from a Socio-semiotic Vantage Point

One of the key words in Puura's definition of semiocide is 'violence'. Therefore, it is imperative that we look into the way violence is/should be perceived in order to understand what Puura meant by "material or mental violence". The common view and shared understanding of violence is that violence spawns more violence. This hermeneutic approach to violence equals violence to an undesirable surplus in human society. In other words, according to this take on violence, violence exists as an exception to the rule in the collective human experience. For instance, the main narrative in the case of Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 (also other major violent outbursts) is the causal hermeneutic narrative that the initial instance of violence, i.e. asphyxiation of George Floyd by a police officer – as an exception to the rule – begot farther violence. That is to say that we, generally speaking, have a Kantian non-violent world that devolves into momentary lapses of violence, which breed more senseless lapses of violence. This outlook on violence works well with and appeases our masked fear of violence being stripped of meaning and becoming arbitrary and unsystematic. This is precisely why the standard understanding of violence gravitates towards meaning-ascription and causal interpretation. Although I do not particularly hold anything against the "violence begets more violence" perspective and I sympathize with hermeneutic approaches to violence, I believe in order to promote our understanding of violence to a practical troubleshooter status, we need to extricate ourselves from reductive hermeneutic interpretation and approach violence as an 'everyday knowledge'. In this regard, we need to disentangle our gaze from only explosive aspects of physical violence and think about objective violence (explained later in this chapter), why we decide to ignore certain types and instances of violence and place emphasis on others, how violence is institutionalized and habitualized, and how violence constructs our reality. This approach to violence, I believe, is the key to understanding "mental violence" in Ivar Puura's definition of semiocide. The fact that we do not consider some instances of violence not headline-worthy can be pinned on a phenomenon which Berger and Luckmann termed habitualization: "Any action that is repeated frequently becomes cast into a pattern, which can then be reproduced with an economy of effort and which, ipso facto, is apprehended by its

performer as that pattern” (Berger & Luckmann 1991: 70 – 71). Habitualized phenomena bring us psychological relief because they rid us of the burden of the too many options and thinking, and for an individual become “embedded as routines in his general stock of knowledge” (ibid: 71). This is precisely why we tend to pass over certain instances of violence – because they become part of our general stock of knowledge. This is specifically alarming in the case of non-physical or “mental violence”. For Berger and Luckmann habitualization is the origin of institutionalization which is “a reciprocal typification of habitualized actions by types of actors” (ibid: 72). In the context of violence, this means the institution prescribes that violence type X must be perpetrated by actor type X. However, we need to remember that before this act of institutionalization, certain types of violence have been habitualized and have become part of our general stock of knowledge, which means we either ignore them or think of them as part of our reality. The violence perpetrated against women in streets by so-called ‘morality police’ or ‘Islamic religious police’ in some Islamic countries and the fact that the passersby do not react at the sight of this violence is a clear case in point. In his 2008 treatise on violence, Žižek typologizes “subjective violence” and “objective violence”. By the former he means the 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” (2008: 2) and by the latter “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” (ibid). Having Berger and Luckmann’s notion of ‘habitualization’ as point of departure would be very rewarding in understanding objective violence and semicide as well. That is to say that objective violence is “normal”, in Žižek’s words, because it has been incorporated into individuals’ subjectivity through habitualization although habitualization is not the one and only mechanism of constructing reality by means of violence. Objective violence does not have material manifestations or explosive features and this is why it is either ignored by the general public or considered normal. Being so, the violence used in semicidal practices can by no means only be subjective violence but can be objective as well. In fact, both Žižek and Puura have highlighted ‘threat of violence’ is their definitions of objective violence and semicide. Let us imagine a case in which semicide is intended to be perpetrated against a certain cultural minority through forced assimilation. This means the hegemonic culture would, for instance, rename and de-name places of cultural significance, cut-off the budget for cultural activities, restrict visiting memory sites, restrict the use of mother tongue, etc. and threaten

citizens who engage in cultural activities and manifestations, such as wearing traditional clothes, doing traditional dances, etc. In this case objective violence – and not physical violence – is employed for the purposes of semiocide. In the next chapter I will have discuss a very similar case with regard to the Macedonian minority in Greece. For Žižek the excessive focus on subjective violence is suspicious and symptomatic, and he, rhetorically, poses the following question about the focus on subjective violence: “Doesn't it desperately try to distract our attention from the true locus of trouble, by obliterating from view other forms of violence and thus actively participating in them?” (ibid: 10 – 11).

1.2 Human Agency in Semiocide (A Taxonomy of Semiocide)

Once more, turning to Puura's conception of semiocide and drawing on the key words “malevolence or carelessness”, I would like to approach the concept taxonomically in this section. Below is the model I would like to suggest in this regard:

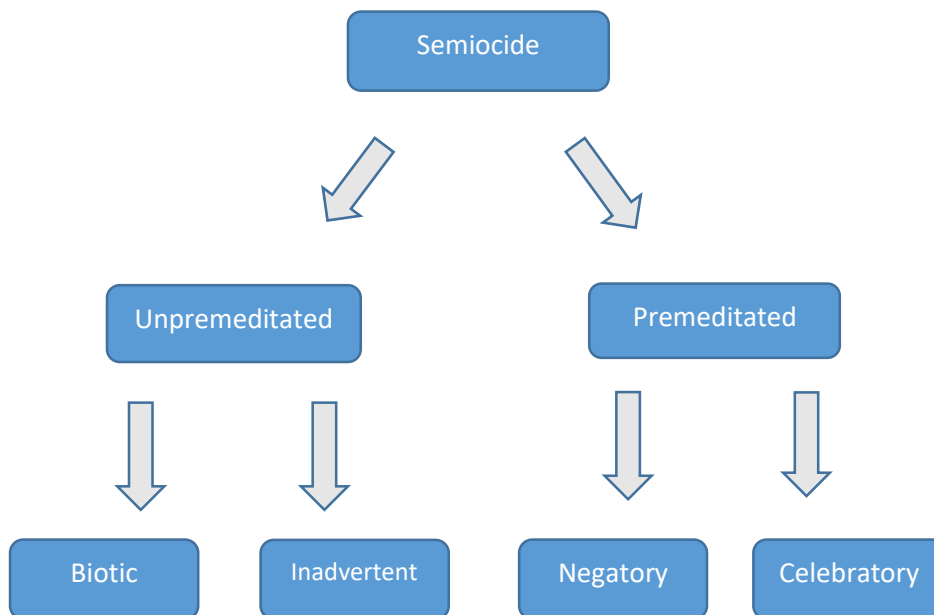


Figure 1: A Taxonomy of Semiocide.

For future references, I term semiocidal practices out of malevolence ‘premeditated’ and the ones out of carelessness ‘unpremeditated’. Due to the topic and approach of this research, much of, if not all, its focus will be on what I call premeditated semiocide and I believe eco-semiotics has better tools to further expand unpremeditated semiocide. However, speaking of unpremeditated semiocide, it can occur, in my understanding, either as part of the inner workings of nature (biotic) or due to perpetrators’ not being aware of the implications of their actions (inadvertent). A case for the former, i.e. biotic, is when a species in nature destroys the semiotic affordances – “those environmental elements that have a tendency to act as objects of signs” (Maran 2014: 145) – of another species, for instance, in pursuit of more survival resources or completely exterminating a particular species for instance as a result of over-hunting. A counterargument to this categorization, however, would be if the members of these species, say a pack of wolves, do the above-mentioned semiocidal acts collectively and cooperatively, would that not be a premeditated case? The answer to this question is premeditated practices of semiocide can only be carried out through agents that are aware of their own semioticity, which requires abstract thinking and not just instinctual patterns of behavior. In this sense, I believe biotic semiocide only occurs as part of the inner workings of nature and belongs to non-human animals. A case for the second scenario, i.e. inadvertent, is when, for instance, humans unwittingly destroy identity-bearing signs of an ecosystem in pursuit of natural resources. A completely different end brings about the destruction of signs on the way to achieve this end. Uslu (2020: 232) introduces a new component to this equation and calls it ‘indifference’ in non-intentional acts of semiocide, which is worthy of mention and can be helpful in understating different cases of inadvertent semiocide. In chapter 2, I have discussed ‘indifferent’ necropolitics of Belgian colonizers during Rwandan genocide. A, perhaps, better example of inadvertent semiocide can be found in (Forman & Alexander 1998² in Maran 2012) where the destructive effects of human traffic noise on the vocal communication of wild birds and the decapacitation of communication signs is discussed.

Premeditated semiocide can only be attributed to humans because of the knowledge of semioticity that it requires, besides the fact that in premeditated semiocide there always exists a hegemonic semiotic sphere, which necessitates the presence of power of some sort. A political theory of semiocide must take premeditated semiocide as its point of departure. Premeditated processes of

² “Road and their Major Ecological Effects” in *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics*.

semiocide (also their aftermath) can occur on two orders: ‘celebratory’ (where the agents of semiocide exude triumphalism) and ‘negatory’ (where the agents endeavor to blot out their practices). The reason behind my opting for the term celebratory is my short visit to Eastern Bosnia witnessing symbols and manifestations of triumphalist discourse in the sites of ethnic cleansing and Srebrenica semiocide besides the inspiration I found in Hikmet Karčić’s (2021: 99) chapter titled “Triumphalism: The Final Stage of the Bosnian Genocide”. He starts the chapter with recounting an anecdote about visiting commemorations of Bosnian Genocide, himself, as a teenager, which meant travelling through the town of Bratunac³:

In those years, travelling through Bratunac on the anniversary date, July 11, meant witnessing the celebratory antics of several hundred local Serbs, who would wait on the corner of the street where the buses turn right towards Potočari. Tricolor flags, posters of the wanted war criminals Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić, racists chants such as “ubij turčina” (Kill the Turk), hand gestures symbolizing the universal sign language for slaughter, as well as the tri-finger salute—along with the occasional stone thrown towards the buses—were all to be expected. These events were remarkable and traumatic because these were not simply youngsters or hooligans. These were entire families, including young children being taught hate at a young age.

Heroic reception of genocide convicts such as Mitar Vasiljević and Biljana Plavšić after their release from jail, the posters (still) sold in convenience stores, murals, urban structures, memorials, pieces of popular music (during and after genocide) and jokes glorifying semiocidal practices, and the political rhetoric of the current president of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, illustrate that the celebration of the semiocidal atrocities has not only faded away but has become institutionalized. Gregory Stanton (2016) defined ten stages for genocide: classification, symbolization, discrimination, dehumanization, organization, polarization, preparation, persecution, extermination, and denial. Building on this, Hariz Halilovich (2018: 7) by coining the term ‘triumphalism’, added an eleventh stage to Stanton’s categorization, writing:

In this stage, perpetrators, their sponsors, and the politics behind genocide do not deny the killings any longer, but rather they glorify them, celebrate their deeds, humiliate the survivors, build monuments to the perpetrators at the sites of the massacres, and create a culture of triumphalism such as has been seen in the parts of Bosnia where Serb militias committed genocide against Bosniaks.

Every case of semiocide is not genocide, but every case of genocide is semiocide. I believe so because 1) besides material elements, you need humans to maintain stories and identities – without humans, stories and identities also evaporate 2) for a socio-cultural unit (religious, ethnic, etc.)

³ This town is located a few kilometers from the Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial. Similar to a number of other towns in the Serb Republic, before the war, Bratunac was inhabited by a majority Bosniak Muslim population. After the genocidal violence this population was entirely eradicated.

with a collective identity and shared stories, each individual is a ‘sign’ that contains and communicates the shared identity and stories. Therefore, the destruction of these individuals (signs) will put the collective identity on the line.

The other side of the picture is when semiocide is tried to be swept under the rug. Acts of semiocide are typically denied through emphasis on unstructured and non-institutional nature of the perpetrated semiocide – claiming only a few bad apples did it and there was no central plan behind it –, pinning the blame on victims, downplaying numbers, resorting to sophistry and archiving documents that might help the truth to bear out. A clear case in point is the Armenian genocide in the Ottoman empire. Official stories from the Turkish side⁴ significantly minimize the number of victims, deny attacks being systematic or ordered by Ottoman officials, undermine Armenian evidence (blocking public access to certain Ottoman-era documents) state that the Armenians had it coming because they took arms against their own government or reduce the events to a civil war. Such a negatory approach to premeditated practices of semiocide can originate from multiple reasons such as preventing the mythologized past of a nation from being tarnished, upholding national master signifiers, pressure from the international community, etc. However, it can also be on account of collective regret of the past and committing the autocommunicated self (see chapter 2) to whitewashing the past atrocities. Jeffrey Olick coined the term ‘politics of regret’ to explain “variety of practices with which many contemporary societies confront toxic legacies of the past” (2007: 122). One of these variety of practices can be blotting out the past atrocities in the form of semiocide. Having said that, the way the concept later panned out is “the process through which the representation of certain problematic past events comes to be dominated by apologetic voices which usually acknowledge the role of the state or of wider society in certain atrocities and thus take some degree of responsibility for them” (Toth: 2015: 553). The dominant discourse in modern Germany with regard to Holocaust being a prime example. In this sense, politics of regret would be the exact opposite of negatory semiocide. In closing this section, I would like to note that although the cases I have mentioned in my discussion of premeditated semiocide might give the reader the impression that this type of semiocide is only limited to human-human interaction, it is not so. An example of human-animal premeditated semiocide is the tragedy of the buffalo in the US. White American settlers slaughtered the buffalo to near extinction in an effort to curb Native

⁴ For instance, this exposé from Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs:
<https://www.mfa.gov.tr/the-armenian-allegation-of-genocide-the-issue-and-the-facts.en.mfa>

Americans, and tourists opened gun fire at buffalos from the windows of their trains. “The average buffalo hunter killed one hundred a day. One hundred thousand buffalo were killed each year, until they were on the verge of extinction, removing the subsistence base from Indian cultures” (Merchant 2007: 20). The supposedly 30-million population was reduced to only a few hundred in the by the end of the 19th century. A US Army colonel reportedly gave the following direction to his troops: “kill every buffalo you can. Every buffalo dead is an Indian gone.”⁵ Therefore, the process and the objective determines the nature of semiocide rather than victim/perpetrator relationship.

1.3 Credocide: A New Component in the Equation of Semiocide

The question this section intends to address itself to is what id semiocide is carried out only on the grounds of the victims’ subscribing to a particular ideology? In such cases the semiocidal agents and the victims share the same national, racial and cultural identity yet the grounds for semiocide becomes the beliefs of the victims that results in divergence of their being as subjects within a hegemonic ideological sphere. The word ‘credo’ is directly loaned from Latin meaning “I believe”. Collins English Dictionary defines the term ‘credo’ as “a set of beliefs, principles, or opinions that strongly influence the way a person lives or works” and Webster Dictionary as “a guiding belief or principle”. The deciding factor in these definitions is that credo guides and influences the holder’s life, which is what incite a perpetrator to instigate his act. I believe credocide constitutes semiocide and by means of the following example, I would like to explain this argument and clarify its difference with ‘politicide’. In 1988 a series of large-scale state-sponsored executions and prison massacres occurred across Iran. The victims mostly consisted of leftist factions (including Organization of Iranian People's Fadaian, Tudeh Party of Iran and People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran⁶) who battled the Shah of Iran along with Islamist groups and contributed to the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran coming to fruition. A report by Amnesty International (2018b) regarding this incident reads:

⁵ Colonel Richard Irving Dodge (1867), quoted in *Heads, Hides, and Horns: The Complete Buffalo Book*, by Larry Barsness (1985: 126).

⁶ Previously designated terrorist organization by the European Union, Canada, the United States, and Japan and currently by Iran and Iraq, this Marxist-Islamic organization is generally seen in a negative light by the Iranian public and also political dissidents mainly due to their collaboration with Saddam Hossein forces in the war against Iran and terror attacks in the 60s and 70s in Iran and against several US military and diplomatic personnel.

Between July and September 1988, the Iranian authorities forcibly disappeared and extrajudicially executed thousands of imprisoned political dissidents in secret and dumped their bodies, mostly in unmarked mass graves. Since then, the authorities have treated the killings as state secrets, tormenting the relatives by refusing to tell them how and why their loved ones were killed and where they are buried. No official has been brought to justice and, in some cases, those involved hold or have held positions of power in Iran.

The exact number of the victims is still a matter of dispute. Estimates are between 5000 to 30000 victims in different sources. The executions were set in motion by a decree from Ruhollah Khomeini (see below), the leader of the Iranian Islamic Revolution and Iran's supreme leader between 1979 and 1989.

...As the treacherous Monafeqin⁷ do not believe in Islam and what they say is out of deception and hypocrisy, and as their leaders have confessed that they have become renegades, and as they are waging war on God, and as they are engaging in classical warfare⁸ in the western, the northern and the southern fronts, and as they are collaborating with the Baathist Party of Iraq and spying for Saddam against our Muslim nation, and the as they are tied to the World Arrogance, and in light of their cowardly blows to the Islamic Republic since its inception, it is decreed that those who are in prison throughout the country and remain steadfast in their support for the Monafeqin, are waging war on God and are condemned to execution... Those who are making the decisions must not hesitate, nor show any doubt or be concerned with details. They must try to be "most ferocious against infidels"⁹.¹

Harff (2003: 58) used the term politicide for the first time to refer to situation where the slain victims are not a target due to their shared ethnic or communal traits but due to their belonging to a political movement. Although some atrocities under Stalin or Mao, for instance, can be described by the term politicide, it cannot be applied to accurately explain the above-mentioned case. Although leftist groups were political rivals of the Islamic regime, as can be seen in Khomeini's letter, the order to execute their members has no direct political grounds in Khomeini's decree. They are equaled to Munafiq – a Quranic concept – and accused of waging war against God, not to mention that the justification of their execution is made by means of a reference to a famous verse in Quran. The decree also does not refer to any political group in specific – Munafiq being used as an umbrella term for a spectrum of divergent thinking – but politics underlies the decree, which makes it a case which is neither completely driven by religious incentives nor completely political. These series of repressive measure, in fact, were carried out to collectively wipe out

⁷ A term used in Islam to refer to so-called hypocritical or corrupt Muslims who propagate against Islam

⁸ Reference to Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988)

⁹ A reference to Quran, chapter 48:29 encouraging all those who believe in Muhammed and his God to be 'firece' or 'forceful' against disbelievers.

¹ The full version of the letter can⁰ be accessed here: <https://www.iranrights.org/library/document/106> and the original version in Persian here: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:67letter.gif>

holders of divergent set of beliefs – beliefs having guiding functions for their holders with regard to their role within a hegemonic semiotic sphere, i.e. credo. This is why I would like to term such instances as credocide as an obvious demonstration semiocide. The semiocidal campaign of the Islamic regime against leftists continued by burying them in mass graves (attack on their identity), banning their books and any left-related cultural manifestations (destruction of meaning-bearing signs), vilifying leftist groups and denying their role in the actualization of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in official narratives, censoring left-leaning voices among journalists, demolishing the victims' graves and persecution of the bereaved and imprisonment of supposed leftists.

1.4 Memory and Semiocide

To speak the name of the dead is to make them live again.

– Ancient Egyptian Inscription

Memory is not conceivable in the absence of semiotic meaning-making mechanisms and processes that people living in a social unit of any form capitalize on to specify, establish and retrieve their recollections. Memory and its study, not only in its cognitive sense but also in its socio-political aspect, is by no means a new subject matter. "'Zakhor!" (Remember!), commanded [the Hebrew bible repeatedly, as for instance in Deuteronomy 32:7, when Moses instructed the assembly of Israel to "Remember the days of old / Consider the years of the many generations""] (Olick et al. 2011: 9). Although the phrase 'collective memory' had been coined far earlier and religious and political bodies of power had realized the social, cultural and cultic significance and capacity of the past, it was in Émile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1961) that collective memory was methodically discussed for the first time – deliberating about how the memory of the ancestors is conveyed across generations. From a Durkheimian perspective, it is the ritual culture that sets the framework and context by means of which a communal past and shared identity is introduced and etched on social consciousness (ibid: 146 – 148). A socio-semiotic approach to history, though, means treating it as a story (a meaning-making process for the present reality and public communication) that is still being unfolded. But the question is whose story gets to become a master signifier and whose story gets to be pushed to the fringes of collective memory and public reception? Even before that, who finds the opportunity to tell the story (or have

their story recorded) and who is silenced (or have their story erased)? This is where remembering and forgetting play the roles of good and evil angels for semiocidal regimes. Remembering comes to be the nemesis for semiocidal agents, whereas forgetting come to the aid of the constructed master signifier and legitimizes power. Memory becomes consequential in the context of semiocide because it is not the past in and of itself that sways and exerts influence on a present reality (society, culture, etc.), but it is, in fact, the representations (signs) of the past that are built, disseminates and experienced within a particular semiotic sphere. The ramifications of the eradication of these past-bearing signs or their deconstruction can be manifold, the most consequential of which is putting identities in jeopardy. Also, “collective memories are produced through mediated representations of the past that involve selecting, rearranging, re-describing and simplifying, as well as the deliberate, but also perhaps unintentional, inclusion and exclusion of information” (Assmann & Shortt 2012: 3). Remembering and forgetting – their semiotic dynamics – have always been two arms of the hegemonic constellations and for this reason memory is filtered in certain hegemonic semiotic spheres and any subversive or divergent flow of memory is obliterated or manipulated, which makes the relationship between the past and the present unsteady and a cinematically open-ended experience. A (semiocidal) example is the ancient Roman sanction on memory, i.e. *Damnatio Memoriae*, by means of which the powers that be condemned the memory of a particular individual. Any representation of such condemned individuals would be erased from anything material, such as inscriptions, coins, paintings, etc. In other words, forgetting took the form of a punitive measure. *Damnatio Memoriae*, is “the first widespread example of the negation of artistic monuments for political and ideological reasons and it has inexorably altered the material record of Roman culture” (Verner 2004: 1). Even though it may come across as counter-intuitive that forgetting can be consciously and purposely realized, it is an important factor in political communication, and this is precisely when semiocide occurs. The framework that can smooth the path for this type of forgetting is subjective violence in totalitarian regimes and objective violence in so-called democratic systems. In this regard, Aleida Assmann (2016) proposes 7 types of forgetting: automatic (disposal of materials), selective (economy of memory space), preservative (archiving of objects), constructive (moving ahead overlooking the past), therapeutic (remembering in order to forget), repressive (memoricide) and defensive (destruction of evidence), the latter two being closely in line with the discussion of this research. For Assmann repressive forgetting is the killing of memory or ‘mnemocide’. (ibid: 49 – 52) This purposeful

erasure or calculated obsolescence of certain memories is not only an immediate danger to identities but also inflicts a second death on the victims (by putting their identities on the line). Many indigenous communities and other subordinated semiospheres have similar experiences with regard to their ‘stories’ being deleted, denied and silenced. Defensive forgetting, which is destruction of evidences (ibid: 53 – 54), occurs when agents of semiocide see their downfall on the horizon. Blocking access to certain documents in national archives or cases such as top Nazi officials destroying their identities and documents to evade prosecution are done to this end. Forgetting can not only be a stepping stone to semiocidal practices by choking and manipulating formal and informal instruments of memory transmission, – such as in the atrocities seen in Cambodia under Khmer Rouge between April 1975 and January 1979 when as far as two million of Cambodia’s eight million population perished while a systematic semiocidal attack on social memory was staged (see Hinton 2014) – it can also function as a post-semiocide stratagem to work towards a denial discourse in an effort to shift sands of memory: constructing a new reality and legitimizing power. Further, some ‘lesser-known’ or ‘hidden’ semiocidal practices that represent forgetting and suppression of semiocide-related knowledge, such as the (mostly) anti-Christian semiocidal measures inflicted on the Assyrians and Greeks in the late Ottoman Empire and early Turkish republic, can be studied within the framework of (semiocidal) forgetting. Having said that, willful forgetting is inherently paradoxical, as Umberto Eco (1988: 257) has pointed out, since it is not possible to erase a sign without simultaneously calling attention to it and bring what is being rendered invisible to the fore because, according to Eco,

First, as a semiotic system, mnemotechnics necessarily place the remembered thing within “rhetorical logic chains” from which it is impossible to wrest it free. Secondly, the process of memory relies fundamentally upon signs, which invariably maintain a positive relationship to their signified and therefore resist the dynamics of forgetting. (Eco in Stubblefield 2012)

In addition, we must not take the agency of the victims for granted; there are always resistance fronts against semiocidal forgetting. A good example of counter-forgetting forces is how ‘illiterate’ poets vigorously take up space in the semiotic sphere by means of artistic performances and oral speech in an effort to fight back the politics of memory and official memory narratives in Uganda and call the attentions to the memory of semiocidal violence 1987 - 2006 in Uganda. (see Ocen 2017) In the third chapter I have explained why semiocidal measures by hegemonic semiospheres is doomed to failure from the outset.

2. Identity Building and Exclusion as Preludes to Semicide

2.1 Opening Gambit: Building Identity

In Puura's initial definition of semicide, there exists an insinuated stress on the notion of identity, a good understanding of which shall not be left undone since it is a defining factor in premeditated practices of semicide. Although, not embodying the full range of interpretations of identity in social sciences and humanities, Elcheroth and Reicher (2017: 9 -16) suggest three broad metaphors of identity by means of which people are divided into distinct and antagonistic groups. The first of these metaphors likens group identities to kinship, revolving on descent, ethnicity and membership. The second, inspired by Huntington's Clash of Civilizations, – “what one might call ‘ways of seeing’ rather than set forms of being” (ibid). The third metaphor, however, likens identity to games, revolving on competition. “Whereas these others root conflict in the differences between groups (and the differences in what they believe in, care for or aspire to), the games metaphor roots conflict in similarities of belief, value and aspiration” (ibid). The first and the second metaphors can be alternatively defined as the encounter between one's own semiosphere and another semiosphere; however, the third as the emic semiotic identity meaning-making process within a particular semiosphere. I believe all of the above-mentioned metaphors are relevant in the study of premeditated semicide and the destruction of identity. Needless to say that what constitutes an individual or group identity and what does not is determined by the meaning-making hotspots at the boundaries of semiotic spaces. These boundaries determine whether an ingroup's language, accent, nationality, religion, facial features, skin color, etc., compared to an outgroup, is defining and relevant data or not in terms of perceived identity. Having said that, kinship seems to be an easy pretext for perpetrating violence that can end up in an act of semicide. That is to say that an attack on the abstract idea of the other that can range from a group of settlers to a neighbor is not tantamount to an attack on an Armenian, a Jew or a Bosnian and if I fall under any of these identity categories any attack on such categories becomes an attack on me. The same fact remains true for a perpetrator, i.e. it cannot belong to an abstract idea of the other such as offender, murderer, etc. Further, premeditated semicide in order to destroy “the signs and stories”, as Puura argues, of the other would thrive on deep-rooted resentment towards such signs and stories – resentment that has

the potential for instigating violence, say ethnic hatred. Nevertheless, avoiding the pitfall of overgeneralization, it must be noted that there are other important parameters apart from kinship that can result in systematic violence the most important of which is ideology – Cambodian genocide (1975 - 1979) which attempted to construct a classless society under the leadership of the communist party and Holocaust (1941 - 1945) being the prime examples.

Cases such as Dominic Ongwen's trial (2021)¹ – a victim turning into a ruthless perpetrator himself – indicate that researching perpetrators of acts of premeditated semiocide, genocide, and mass violence is of the essence. Perpetrators of such atrocities and their motives are rather understudied subject matters in academia since there is always a tendency to identify with the victims of such atrocities and set oneself apart from the inflictors of suffering, and humanizing the perpetrators and giving them a podium to justify their practices is not only politically incorrect but also is a moral taboo. However, such studies are essential because they can allow for an understanding of what gives birth to such perpetrators and what their motives are so as to prevent future cases. Anderson and Jesse are the authors of the only book, i.e. *Researching the Perpetrators of Genocide* (2020), that has specifically endeavored to investigate into perpetrators. The book, however, is written to mostly assist researchers of perpetrators, and scholars of genocide in terms of ethics and methodology and does not provide a concrete model to explain the motives behind the perpetrator's actions and is mostly relevant for genocide studies only. Inspired by Elcheroth and Reicher's metaphors for identity, I argue, the motives behind the atrocities committed by perpetrators in cases of premeditated semiocide can be outlined by the following two, admittedly broad, categories:

1) Social Identity

According to Tajfel, the part of a person's self-concept that derives from the knowledge gained from his membership in a social group together with the worth and emotional importance attached to that membership is that person's social identity (1984: 526 - 527). In cases where social identity is a motive there usually is a competition between the two involved semiospheres, which has the potential to result in violence.

¹ See International Criminal Court's Report: <https://www.icc-cpi.int/Pages/item.aspx?name=pr1590>

2) Personal Identity

Turner and Tajfel (1979: 34 – 35) defined personal identity as “a set of features that distinguishes the individual unique self from all other persons”. When personal identity becomes a motive, it often has to do either with self-promotion and material interests or psychological factors such as sadistic desires.

2.2 The Confluence of Identity, Political Violence and Exclusion

When it comes to identity and violence (intentionality of semiocide), though, two main approaches to this relationship can be highlighted: The approach resting on identity which thinks of violence as a ramification of foregoing ethnic, kinship, cultural, etc. antagonism. And the approach resting on violence that takes exception to such a cause-and-effect relationship contending that antagonism as such tends to be the result of violence rather than being its ramification. However, as Peinhopf (2021: 2) argues both of these approaches can be inadequate since “whereas identity-based theories do not take the generative power of violence seriously enough, violence-based theories run the risk of taking it too seriously and often do not pay significant attention to individual agency”. There is also a flip side to such an understanding of the relationship between violence and identity that I would like to propose and that is how sometimes violence is utilized in order to build identity, which is due to the relational nature of the notion of identity if semiotically broken down. One of the most consequential contributions of Saussure is the relational understanding of meaning-making processes. For Saussure, concepts can only bear sense in relation to other concepts. According to him, “concepts are purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system. Their most precise characteristic is in being what the others are not” (1915: 117). To clarify, in a more semiotic sense, he went on to say, “signs function, not through their intrinsic value but through their relative position” (1915: 118). This means that in a perceived idea of identity ‘self’, ‘my group, etc. only makes sense in relation to its opposite and what ‘the other’, ‘their group’, etc. is not and violence, in certain cases is the most straightforward mechanism to fix this relation. Now with this knowledge in mind, let us go back to the flip side to understanding the relationship between violence and identity. The identity-building project through violence is an intentionally planned

political project, which can be abundantly found throughout history and also it is a commonly used strategy in separatist campaigns where secessionist leaders take advantage of violence in their struggle to polarize the sides in terms of identity so as to facilitate their socio-political separation. We can understand the multiple instances of desecration occurred against Babri Mosque in India by fundamentalist Hindus as a game plan to intensify the identity-building project since a potential retaliation from the Muslim side would help along and smooth the path for an identity-based polarization of society and as a matter of fact they were successful with this scheme. Another historical example, which had the potential to turn into an all-out semiocide, is the conflict between Catholic and Protestant Christians in the so-called Thirty Years' War where violence was along the path of building identity and labelling the other as non-Christian identity.

Conscious semiocide, similar to other socio-political practices, is a process that evolves and occurs over time. As laid out in the previous section, it is contrary to reason to practice a set of socio-political measures involving semiocide prior to, initially, building models of identity in relation to the other, i.e. semiotic meaning-making processes that establish ways of understanding I, ourselves, etc. and those to whom we give the role of 'other'. In addition, the demonization of 'the other' that may lead to semiocide does not necessarily coincide with identity building and might occur long afterwards. The othering process prior to semiocidal measure can also be individual or ingroup practices. That is to say that the perpetrators endeavor to eliminate the otherness in themselves. This helps the dehumanization of the other needed to commit semiocide. It is not by any means trouble-free to destroy the stories and signs (identity) of the people whom we think belong to a semiotic space that resembles ours. It is undoubtedly less complicated to commit semiocide against the people whom we consider to be outsiders. Zygmunt Bauman (1989) introduced the neologism 'adiaphorization' to refer to a kind of moral liquidity that involves disabling or suppressing of one's sense of right and wrong through strong emphasis on the pursuit of efficiency as well as one's insensitivity to the suffering of strangers, which is indispensable in developing acts of political violence that result in semiocide. Due to its multiple facets in the modern world, it is virtually impossible to produce an all-inclusive definition of political violence. Relying on initial definitions of political violence in the literature from the 1960s and 1970s, which center around physical harm and internal conflicts, tends to be problematic as, for instance, psychological intimidation, disruption of food security and denial of freedom of speech can fall under acts of political violence. Therefore, political violence can constitute a systemic form as

Zizek maintains, “the violence inherent in a system: not only direct physical violence, but also the more subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation, including the threat of violence” (2008: 9). However, speaking of political violence, we can focus on two parameters: 1) structurality of the violence (the agents being structures such as legal apparatus, armed forces, cultural institutions, etc. 2) perpetrated in order to achieve a political goal (driven by ideology, power struggle, etc.) Violence of this nature is indispensable to premeditated semiocide. My argument is that the principal mechanism that opens space for semiocide, which incorporates othering, demonization and dehumanization, is exclusion (whose main vehicle is political violence followed by identity-building). In fact, identity-building project and exclusion precede the act of semiocide. There is, undoubtedly, no linear causal relationship between identity-building and exclusion and these phenomena engage in a dialectical relationship as a means to a semiocidal end. Having said that, I do not believe identity is built as a result of exclusion.

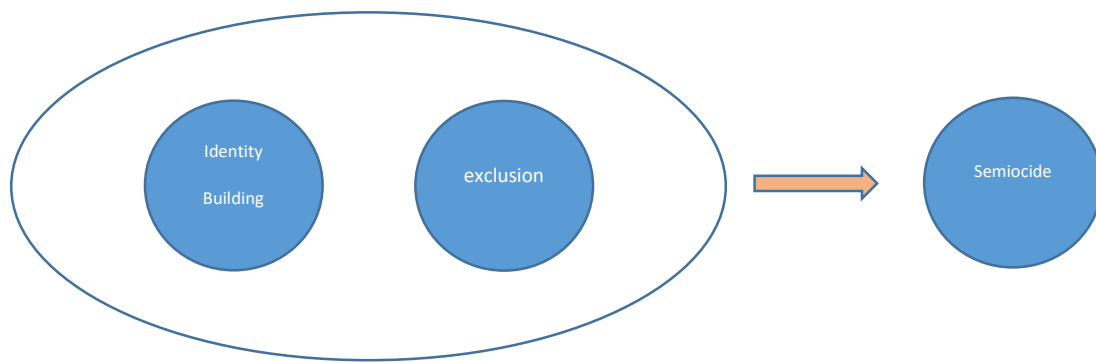


Figure 2

This model places identity-building before exclusion, which by no means signifies a causal relationship – in fact exclusion reinforces identity. However, the reason for such a configuration is that I argue there exists a degree of collective self-description (as a result of auto-communication) that acts as a basis for exclusionary devices. Prior to clarifying how exclusion itself can have different orders and mechanisms, I need to clarify what is meant by the term and how it is different from its commonly understood sense.

2.3 A New Understanding of Exclusion

The notion of exclusion on a societal level and form was first conceptualized in France by René Lenoir (1974) the then Secretary of State of Social Action. “French socialist politicians used social exclusion to refer to individuals who were not covered by the social security system” (Taket et al., 2009: 6). It is now commonly defined as “inability to participate effectively in economic, social, political and cultural life, alienation and distance from the mainstream society” (Duffy 1995: 17). The other side of the exclusion coin in this sense is social inclusion, i.e. “the attempt to re-integrate or increase the participation of marginalised groups within mainstream goals” (Barry, 1998: 1). However, the kind of exclusion that precedes acts of premeditated semiocide cannot be fully explicated by definitions that revolve around unfair power, class and economic structures and the denial of social rights or political engagement. What I mean by exclusion is – although incorporating the previously-mentioned aspects of the term – the semiotic creation of an ‘other’ who is actively being expelled from the core of a particular semiosphere and is, therefore, regarded to be outside the sphere of moral obligation. This semiotic creation of an ‘other’ cannot function without exclusionary devices and pivots on autocommunication, homo-sacerization, necropolitics, mythologization and depluralization.

2.3.1 Autocommunication

Coined by Juri Lotman, who repeatedly accentuated the dynamic nature of culture, autocommunication is a meaning-making mechanism that brings together two communication models: I-I communication and I-s/he communication (Lotman 1977: 99 – 101). The difference between the 'I-s/he' communication model and the 'I-I' model is that in the former information is transferred in space but in latter in time. (Lotman 1990: 21). “As autocommunication creates new information at both the cultural and individual levels, specific characteristics are manifested, including (1) its qualitative reconstruction, (2) not being self-contained or redundant and (3) the doubling and redefinition of both the message and the code” (Andrews 2021). The concept of autocommunication is very significant and quite recurrent in Lotmanian semiotics of culture since without the self-descriptive feature that lies in the ‘I-I’ communication model, speaking of cultural identity would be beside the point. In this regard, and from the perspective of the Tartu-Moscow

Semiotic School, Torop writes “that which on one level of culture manifests itself as a process of communication and a dialogue between addresser and addressee can be seen on a deeper level as the autocommunication of culture and a dialogue of the culture with itself” (Torop 2008: 394). Otherwise stated, autocommunication is a self-reflexive communication practice by means of which a particular culture becomes conscious, acknowledges and verifies its own image. Autocommunication is central to both identity building – since it is a homeostatic mechanism that transforms the self into something desirable (Lotman 1988: 120, in Semenenko 2012: 39) – and to exclusion – since it plays a pivotal role in the formation of meaning-making hotspots at the boundaries of semiotic spaces – prior to an act of semiocide. In their ongoing attempt to homogenize Anatolia, Ottoman rulers came to understand that the goal of Turkifying the Greeks and Armenians was unattainable and therefore resorted to the annihilation of their stories and identity. The semiocidal practices perpetrated on Armenians was first and foremost instigated by the very notion of Turkishness, which was a self-reflexive description of Turkish culture, and then constructing semiotic boundaries predicated on autocommunication-induced identity to exclude the Armenian community. (see Akçam 2004 & Kévorkian 2011). Writers such as, Ziya Gökalp and Kuşçubaşı Eşref, as played a significant role in Turkish autocommunication and were in a sense entrepreneurs of Turkish cultural and national identity, which was the grounds for self-description for future acts of semiocide. Turkish self-image was formed and belonging to the semiotic space that represented this self-image born out of autocommunication meant that “one had to a) speak the language, b) carry a Turkish name, c) abide to Ottoman interpretation of history, d) follow supposedly ancient customs and e) convert to the Islam” (Holslag 2015: 104). The following exclusion of the outsiders of the Turkish semiotic space, e.g. the Armenian community, was carried out under the aegis of this self-description.

2.3.2 Homo-sacerization

In order to study any instance of premeditated semiocide, it imperative that the mechanism of being expelled from the core of a particular semiosphere and regarded to be outside the sphere of moral obligation be conceptualized. A useful point of departure, in this regard, would be Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben’s discussion of ‘the state of exception’ where ‘the other’ develops a special relationship with the dominant power and can be easily effaced from the controlling

semiotic space. Schmitt, drawing on the experience of Weimer Republic, maintains that a sovereign is not an agent on top of a hierarchy but who that issues a decree when an emergency exists (Schmitt 2005: 5-6). On the other hand, Agamben, taking a historical approach defines Roman legal institution of Iustitium as an archetype for the state of exception, which signified an interval – not total abolishment – in following the law in the face of an urgent or exceptional state (Agamben 2005: 41-43). In his introduction to *Homo Sacer*, Agamben brings up a key distinction and explains that the ancient Greeks adopted two terms to refer to ‘life’: Zoe – the ordinary form in which life is lived, common to human and non-human animals and gods – and Bios – a form of qualified life that distinguishes one from another (Agamben 1998: 1-2). That is to say the politics towards achieving overarching human happiness (Eudaionia) was congruous to Bios and not Zoe. The prevalence of a state of exception, ultimately, gives birth to an unprecedented kind of life, apart from Bios and Zoe, which Agamben names ‘bare life’; a life in which the individual lives under the shadow of fear and death and is stripped of her legal and biological rights and is not even allowed to preserve her identity (Agamben 1998: 4; 8; 188). Bare life is in the constant transition between culture and nature and “has the peculiar privilege of being that whose exclusion founds the city of men (Agamben 1998: 7). That who has a bare life, in Agamben’s words, is called Homo Sacer. The ground zero for Agamben’s narrative is the Roman judicial system in which a Homo Sacer would not be sacrificed as a punishment for her crime; however, she may be killed without the killing being classed as murder. To wit, “bare life remains included in politics in the form of the exception, that is, as something that is included solely through an exclusion” (Agamben 1998: 11). In the same vein, the victims of semiocide are only granted a life of Zoe and not Bios and are reduced to bare lives whose exclusion becomes the manifestation of culture and a pure ‘us’ – an inclusion through exclusion. In other words, victims of semiocide, i.e. homo-sacerized beings, are concurrently restrained by legal structures yet cast aside and not protected by them, placing them in a position out of moral obligation wherein they can be killed by anyone (effaced semiotically). A case in point is the semiocide perpetrated on the Baha’i community in Iran. The attack on people of Baha’i faith in post Islamic revolution in Iran is a manifestation of destruction of stories and identity, which has included appropriation and destruction of Baha’i holy sites and material and non-material culture; spoiling and wiping out Baha’i cemeteries; being banned from public discourse; complete cessation of all Baha’i administrative bodies and community activities; and ethnic cleansing (although it has never taken the form of a brutal massacre or indiscriminate

killings). (see Bachman 2019: 246 - 266) As for the homo-sacerization of the Baha'i community, a 2017 BBC report¹ revealed that the murderers (two brothers) of a Baha'i citizen in Yazd, Iran were released after they confessed that they killed the victim only because of his Baha'i faith. This is because the homo-sacered Baha'i individuals in Iran are bound by law yet abandoned by it, placing them outside the boundaries of moral obligation wherein they can be killed by anyone – exclusion through inclusion.

2.3.3 Necropolitics

Achille Mbembe deviates to some extent from Schmitt's conception of sovereignty and starts his chapter on necropolitics with "the ultimate expression of sovereignty largely resides in the power and capacity to dictate who is able to live and who must die. To kill or to let live thus constitutes sovereignty's limits, its principal attributes" (Mbembe 2019: 66). There is a historical evolution from Foucault's biopolitics to Mbembe's necropolitics. Foucault's *Society Must Be Defended*, *Lectures at the College de France*, was the birthplace of the notions of biopolitics and biopower where he explains:

one of the greatest transformations political right underwent in the nineteenth century was precisely that sovereignty's old right—to take life or let live—was [not exactly] replaced, but came to be complemented by a new right which does not erase the old right but which does penetrate it, permeate it. This is the right, or rather precisely the opposite of right. It is the power to 'make' live and 'let die'. (2003: 41)

For Foucault biopolitics refers to a kind of regimen that "brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made power knowledge an agent of transformation of human life" (1990: 143). However, for Agamben, as highlighted in the previous section, the binary of Zoe and Bios controls the production of biopolitical body. An extension to biopolitics, necropolitics has to do with "the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not" (Mbembe 2003: 26). Puar (2007) explains the distinction between biopolitics and necropolitics along the following lines "the latter makes its presence known at the limits and through the excess of the former; the former masks the multiplicity of its relationships to death and killing in order to enable the proliferation of the latter" (35). Mbembe's notion of necropolitics,

¹ 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> & <https://ir.voanews.com/a/iran-bahaei-yazd-/3568061.html>

which focuses on the inscription of bodies in the command of power is, I believe, very relevant and useful in studying cases of premeditated semiocide. Drawing on the cases of slaves – which he attributes it (slavehood) to a triple loss: loss of a home, loss of rights over his or her body, and loss of political status – in plantations and the colonized in the colonies, where 1) the complete absence of law arises out of the denial of humanity to the native and where 2) the violent measures taken by the state of exception are practiced for and with the same name as civilization, Mbembe maintains that the state of exception, the relation of enmity and the state of siege - which allows a modality of killing - become the normative grounds for the right to kill (Mbembe 2003: 16). Necropolitics was the most defining determinant in semiocidal activities in Rwanda in 1994, which later evolved into an all-out genocide. Apart from the fact that Belgian colonizers' anthropometric ethnic cards (Jesse, 2017: 6) to distinguish Hutus, Tutsis and Twas from one another paved the way for future ethnic prejudice and exclusion, necropolitics conducted to the atrocities in two specific forms: first, before the revolution, when the Belgian colonizers saw the overthrow of Tutsi dominance to their interest, which could only be achieved by Tutsi's being stripped of their right to live (deciding the Tutsis must die and Hutus must live):

In the period of the Hutu Revolution, the Belgian colonialists did not engage in the individual, physical act of killing Tutsi citizens. Instead, Colonel Logiest instructed his Belgian staff to watch passively as Hutu elite, the soon-to-be leaders of the country, orchestrated and carried out, sometimes with their own hands, more often via supervision of local leaders, massacres against Tutsi residents. (sinema 2012: 113)

Second, after the revolution, the 'super-race' rhetoric of the of the Kayibanda regime – Hutu elites – gave them the carte blanche to dictate who shall live and who shall die, the latter being Tutsis during every recorded case of violence over eleven years. (see Guichaoua 2015 & Sinema 2012)

2.3.4 Mythologization of the Other

Any sign (let us take a particular 'word' as an example for a sign) can bear a non-literal, figurative, metaphorical, etc. meaning alongside its literal meaning. What is known as implicit and explicit meaning in everyday parlance has in fact a direct bearing to the famous signifier/signified relation. In this regard, two types of signifieds are characterized: denotative signified and connotative signified. Signification (meaning) embodies both and none is intrinsically superior to the other. Danesi (2004: 12), similar to Thomas Sebeok, thinks connotation occurs when we extend a denotation so that it incorporates "a whole range of other referents". The example he uses is how

the word 'house' as "structure for human habitation" (ibid) can, for instance, mean a "legislative assembly" and "audience in a theater" in "The house is in session" and "The house roared with laughter", respectively. According to Sebeok, the denotatum, i.e. the denotated referent is a prototypical category of something rather than something specific. (Sebeok 2001: 6) For example, "the word cat does not refer to a specific 'cat,' although it can, but to the category of animals that we recognize as having the quality 'catness'" (ibid). It must be noted that connotative meaning of a sign is born out of the interplay between personal (emotive, etc.) socio-cultural (ideological, etc.) factors. Inspired by Louis Hjelmslev, Roland Barthes defined denotation and connotation as different (two) orders of signification. For Barthes, connotation constitutes the second order of signification, which has the denotative sign as its signifier and chains to it a further signified. To wit, "sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second" (Barthes, 1972: 113). Chandler (2007: 139) explains:

From such a perspective, denotation can be seen as no more of a natural meaning than is connotation but rather as a process of naturalization. Such a process leads to the powerful illusion that denotation is a purely literal and universal meaning which is not at all ideological, and indeed that those connotations which seem most obvious to individual interpreters are just as natural.

It is the second order of signification that Barthes named 'myth' (1972: 113) and, as widely known, demonstrated it with the image of a young dark-skinned soldier saluting the French flag. The two orders of signification, i.e. denotation and connotation come together to construct ideology (constituting myth), which Fiske and Hartley call the third order of signification (Fiske & Hartley 2003: 30). I believe in the semiocidal mechanisms of exclusion myths serve two key functions: 1) mythologization is used by the perpetrators as an apparatus to conceptualize an abstract other or an alien semiosphere. For example, taking the repressive ideology of the Communist Party in China against minorities have been mythologized in the form of 'War on Terror' to commit all out semicide against the Uyghur minority. In other words, the abstract other (Uyghur individual) for a common Chinese is being mythologized as a potential terrorist who is a latent threat to security, peace and order. 2) Mythologization is used by the perpetrators to transform the future victims of semicide from 'an individual' – a person with identity and a life of bios – to 'a subject' – a reduced form of life (not an actual person with identity) that exists only as a certain set of assigned roles by the dominant ideology constructed through mythologization. This is because it is easier to place a subject with predefined ideological roles (Jews in Nazi Germany, Uyghurs in China, Bahai's in

Iran, etc. seen as parasites, terrorists, degenerates, etc.) outside the boundaries of moral obligation and destroy the signs that bear their stories and identity. I would also like to highlight the fact that mythologization can be adopted in the post-semiocide era towards the naturalization of the atrocities in celebratory semiocides, bestowing a halo of necessity or normalcy on such acts the discussion of which is beyond the scope of this section.

2.3.5 Depluralization and Expulsion from the Public Sphere

When we speak of political semiotics we are addressing a discipline that is incumbent on studying how the political and its institutions are articulated and mediated by means of public communication. As Selg and Ventsel explain “When we talk about political semiotics, then the problematic this label tries to capture is, put very roughly, the constitution of power, governance and, democracy within and through communication” (2020: 2). In this sense the individual (not a subject), the political and the public sphere form an indissoluble triad. From this perspective, what particularizes humans is the capacity of being what Aristotle defined ‘political animals’ (Aristotle 1932: 9), which he believes is manifested in the polis or the city where political activity materializes. This highest of communities, in Aristotle’s words, embodies a type of public sphere that Harbermas characterizes as “a domain of social life where public opinion can be formed” (1991: 398). Unlike its modern sense, private life in ancient mentality was tantamount to the highest level of social deprivation and being stripped of a human’s highest capacity. “A man who lived only a private life, who like the slave was not permitted to enter the public realm, or like the barbarian had chosen not to establish such a realm, was not fully human” (Arendt 1998: 38). In other words, reduced forms of life – ones only living a life of Zoe – such as slaves were excluded from the political affairs of the polis or the public sphere. The third order of Arendt’s concept of Vita Activa – the life of speech and action – following work and labor is ‘action’, which is profoundly social and a political activity par excellence. This order of activity only occurs when ‘political animals’ convene each with their own uniqueness, attributes and concerns working towards redesigning or transforming the shared world. “Only action is the exclusive privilege of man. Neither a beast nor a god is capable of it, and only action is entirely dependent upon the constant presence of others” (Arendt 1998: 22 – 23). This is to say a life of action exists neither in isolation nor for the outcast and directly hinges on public sphere. “Action, the only activity that

goes on directly between men...” (ibid: 7). For Arendt action only occurs amid human plurality (ibid: 182). This is a point of departure for the concept of plurality becoming a key and ubiquitous concept in Arendt’s work. She goes on to say “plurality is the law of the earth” (Arendt 1981: 19). One can argue that the multiplication of identities under the aegis of action is what Arendt terms plurality. “Plurality, then, means not only that individuals exhibit unique identities in their relations to others, but also that the full diversity of those identities is displayed only by the involvement of the individuals in a variety of relationships” (McGowan 1998: 23). Having mentioned the points above, we arrive at two key mechanisms of exclusion: 1) obliterating plurality, which means nipping the proliferation of identities in the bud and dismissing equality 2) expelling the victims from the public sphere, which means denial of the right to engage in political activity, i.e. decapacitating the political animal. In the previously mentioned cases the dialectic between the both mechanisms and their simultaneous development can be noted. I would like to add, in a perhaps broad and rather radical example, that what we know as the White Man’s Burden in the 19th and 20th century was a clear substantiation of such exclusionary practices in the communities against which semiocide was effected – the invaders not only took the political institutions in their hands but also endeavored to Europeanize the victims in an effort to obliterate plurality. It is also interesting to take note of how Greek and Armenian minorities were systematically kept disconnected (excluded) from the public sphere and its political action. In Ziya Gökalp’s – one the most influential founding fathers of Turkish National Identity – words, “non-Muslim communities had no part of the political life of the Empire and were exempt from military service and that they therefore could concentrate their attention on their economic interests” (Heyd 1950: 130).

2.4 Forced Assimilation and the Missing Signifier

Before drawing the chapter to close, I would like to first offer a concession and then provide my final observation about the discussions in this chapter. The concession I would like to make is that I acknowledge that in certain circumstances the flip side of exclusion, i.e. inclusion can precede semicide. However, inclusion of this nature co-occurs with coercion from the hegemonic culture takes the form of an imposed assimilation. A clear case in point is the Greek denial of Macedonian minority and referring to them as Slavophone or bilingual Greeks in official documents in an effort to put the stories and identity of this community on the line. In 1993, a tripartite human rights fact-finding mission through the agency of Human Rights Watch, comprised of Danish Helsinki Committee, Minority Rights Group-Greece, and Human Rights Watch/Helsinki, confirmed the semicidal imposed assimilation of Macedonian minority in Greece, which included but not limited to refusal to permit a center for Macedonian culture and performance of Macedonian songs and dance, refusal to permit teaching of the Macedonian language, harassment, changing Macedonian names and ordering religious services to be performed in Greek with the intention of a forced inclusion of the Macedonian minority by means of cultural semicide.

Finally, as my concluding observation regarding exclusion, I would like to argue that for a better understanding of exclusionary courses of action we may understand the excluded side as the very lack of a signifier within a particular semiosis which constitutes that semiosis as possible. This is what Alenka Zupancic, inspired by Lacan's idea of 'the borrow other, names the missing signifier and defines it as "the nonexistent ("originally missing") signifier, which – with its very nonexistence – dictates the logic of the signifying chain" (Zupancic 2017: 117). In other words, a missing signifier is a structural deficiency that in fact completes the structure. We can take the notion of fair wage in fast fashion industry as a signifier that is absent; however, this very absence is what makes the fast fashion industry prevail, meaning if fair wage was present as a signifier a pair of jeans for 9 Euros would not be possible to be produced, therefore, putting an end to the existence of such an industry. In the process of identity-building and exclusion, the excluded other is a lack in the signification which the whole signification hinges upon. It must be noted that intentionally turning 'the other' into a missing signifier can be a mechanism followed by the perpetrator to execute semicide.

3. Semiocide and the Infinite Semiosis

3.1. *Psychoanalytic Method and the political*

Psychoanalytic methods in the studies of culture and arts have become widely acknowledged and scholars such as Golan (2006), Žižek (2016), Rashkin (2008) and Ruti (2009) have unreservedly made use of psychoanalysis to comment of various cultural phenomena and works of art. Robinson (2004) also speaks of a new wave of psychoanalytic reading of the political among so-called ‘radical thinkers’, which, he believes, is manifest in Essex School of Discourse, international relations and feminist studies. Distinguished social scientists exploiting various concepts of psychoanalysis is by no means a rare phenomenon. One of the key concepts that Laclau and Mouffe borrowed from Lacan in their theory of discourse is *point de capiton*, which can be taken as a fundamentally semantic concept. The socio-political significance of *point de capiton* for Laclau and Mouffe is not only the determinative nature of a certain signifier in a chain signifieds in a way that it disambiguates whatever that is vague in this chain or completely transforms the meaning of a discourse from base but also its function as a signifier around which collective identities converge. (Laclau, Mouffe, 2014) However, there is still a lot of ambivalence and skepticism regarding such methods in the realm of politics felt by both social scientists and psychoanalysts, and eyebrows are raised by scholars of the field such as Critchley (2003: 66), who particularly attacks Žižek’s method in this regard and calls Lacanian psychoanalysis in politics into question. Having said that, criticisms of such an approach to the political are in no way the product of a recently developed trend: “when French sociologist Raymond Aron used the metaphor of psychodrama to explain what was happening in 1968, he was roundly criticized by the Left for psychologizing away the political importance of what was taking place” (Turkle 1992: 9). Yannis Stavrakakis in his 1999 book *Lacan and the Political* poses the following central question: How is Lacan, an abstruse psychoanalyst turned philosopher, is relevant to the political? Following the trans- and inter-disciplinary epistemological paradigm shift in the second half of the 20th century, with thinkers such as Foucault and Lacan himself, Stavrakakis’s question sounds beside the point today. However, it is legitimate to be asked because it arises from the concern about reducing the social level, i.e. the objective level, to a methodology that is tantamount to the individual level, i.e. the subjective level, and doing so with no well-founded grounds. Having said that, this form of

objectivism can be counterintuitive from a semiotic point of view since what a socio-semiotician does is decipher meaning from within the system and from the vantage point of the society that signs are targeted to. In this regard, Krippendorff believes that the mainstream of semiotic scholarship is based on a form of objectivism which “entails a commitment to the belief in a reality that possesses observer or culture independent structures, objects, codes and laws waiting to be discovered, enciphered and described.” (Krippendorff 1992: 5) I, in the same way, as Yannis Stavrakakis believe that “psychological reductionism, that is to say the understanding of socio-political phenomena by reference to some sort of psychological substratum, an essence of the psyche, is something that should clearly be avoided” (1999: 2). Lacan himself condemned the tendency to reduce all that is subjective to the individual or the ego (Lacan 2006: 99).

Analysis, however, is not a detached theory, the psychology of an isolated individual (Lacan opposed any such form of atomistic psychology), and the analysand is not a ‘solitary wanderer’: the analysand becomes an analysand within the analytic setting by being linked to another, to his/her analyst. (Stavrakakis 1992: 2)

This connection embodies a social bond in the practice of analysis, which is what Miller describes as the minimum social bond. (Miller in Stavrakakis 1999: 2) For this reason, the basis of later Freud’s work was to indicate that it is the analytic dialectic that creates the kernel of the social bond. This is precisely why, in works such as *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), he grants authorization to our cognition with respect to the political sphere. (Stavrakakis 1992: 2)

Dolar (2018) speaks of a triad consisting of the subject, the ego and the person. He maintains thinking of these three components independent of a social link is not in the least likely. For this reason, he believes, the political is present in all places in Freud’s oeuvre to the extent that there would barely be an opportunity to discuss alternative ideas. For him, every single page from Freud has a political implication. Having said that, Freud and Lacan’s methodologies in investigating how the individual and the collective level are related and conceiving the dialectic between the two are qualitatively different. Unlike for Freud, for Lacan there is no possibility for the existence of a subject that is non-social. “With a little help from Hegel, Marx, Heidegger and Freud, Lacan transformed Pico’s notion into the indeterminacy of the subject, whose essence is the lack of essence” (Chaitin 1996: 196). It is this lack of essence that forms the social life for Lacan. Lacanian sociology, then, strives to negate the duality of the subject and the symbolic and this is because there is dialectic between the two and one cannot exist without the other. In other words, the big other is contingent upon the subject in order to exist (similar to the Hegelian dialectic of master

and slave). In that respect, in his *A Theoretical Introduction to the Functions of Psychoanalysis in Criminology*, as early as 1950, he points out:

It may be well that since its experience is limited to the individual, psychoanalysis cannot claim to grasp the totality of any sociological object, or even the entirety of causes currently operating in our society. Even so, in its treatment of the individual, psychoanalysis has discovered relational tensions that appear to play a fundamental role in all societies, as if the discontent in civilization went so far as to reveal the very joint of nature to culture. If one makes the appropriate transformation, one can extend the formulas of psychoanalysis concerning this joint to certain human sciences that can utilize them. (Lacan 1996: 14)

The significance of *point de capiton*¹ – the point where the signifier is stapled to the signifier – in Lacan's system of thought is that it is a uniting point to construct collectivity and also render it coherent. "The points de capiton represent, in Lacan's theory, points of intersection between the order of the signifier and the order of the signified" (Žižek 2003: 62). Contrary to Lacan's conception, for Freud, the uniting factor of thousands or millions of people and what regulates their relations is the libidinal investment in a leader, ideology or idea (country, party, etc.) (Freud 2014). There are obvious political advantages in contending for points de capiton as this can enable the dominator to control collective subjectivity, which is substantial for exclusionary devices leading to semicide. This, for instance, occurs in mythologization of the other (discussed in the previous chapter) where a socio-political discontent is quilted to a master signifier (race, religion, masculinity, etc.). It is important to be kept in mind that points de capiton can be quilting signifiers themselves: The National Socialist German Workers' Party (The Nazi Party) successfully installed Jews as German Identity's point de capiton or similarly Armenians for Turkish national identity. I also believe that politics (including semicidal politics) can be established around a missing signifier and the presence of a master signifier is not necessarily of requisite essence. One can draw the conclusion that from the very outset, Lacan acknowledged the dialectic between the individual and the collective level. In his later works and as his approach started to stand on the radical side, he was believed to be trying to deconstruct the essentialist chasm between the individual and social level. His discussion of subjectivity is consequential not only because it offers a novel understanding of it, but also it compensates for subjectivity being left unnoticed in Marxism. He did so by setting forth an unprecedented understanding of subjectivity, i.e. a socio-political one, by no means reduced to individuality and individual psyche but a subjectivity that prepared the ground for the conception of the objective. His Four Discourses are prime examples

¹ In some translations "quilting point" or "anchoring point"

of this novel perception of subjectivity. For this very reason, the Lacanian subject plays a pivotal role in contemporary approaches to the collective level.

The most significant aspect of Lacanian theory is that, in Stavrakakis's words, "it permits a true implication or inter-implication – and not a mere application – between psychoanalysis and socio-political analysis; it does not remain trapped within a traditional framework that applies psychoanalysis to socio-political issues by simply adding a theory of subjectivity to the field of political analysis" (1999: 4). Contrary to Lacan, the cynical implication of Freud's conception of the individual Vs. collective opposition (Freud 1965) is not difficult to see and to all intents and purposes, it also destabilizes the feasibility of a psychoanalytic politics in its radical form. The flawed approach of automatic reference of the social and the political to the individual, which justifies reservations about psychoanalytic methods, arises from this opposition. Taking "every semiotic system entails the exclusion of certain other possible systems. Therefore, power is present potentially in every signifying process or meaning-making" (Selg & Ventsel 2020: 121-2) and the fact that psychoanalytic approaches to the political, Lacanian method in particular, tend to come to grips with power relations, dominant powers and discourses and master signifiers (in a sense resembling the perpetrator of premeditated semicide), I believe approaches of this nature can prove productive in the study of semicide. In this research, I will not move from the individual to the social or the other way around, but I will make use of Lacanian concepts, in particular the quadratic positions he offered for his discourses, to explain the semiosis of othering and the production of the new sign following the act of semicide.

3.2. Discursive Semiosis and the Eternal Return of the New Sign

Apart from his intersubjective understanding of language, the Saussurean structuralist linguistics was instrumental in inspiring Lacan to locate and reveal social bonds and its workings in language: "Society is not something that can be defined like that in general. What I am trying to spell out, because psychoanalysis gives me the evidence for it, is that what dominates it, is the way language is used (*la pratique du langage*). The proof is perhaps that you envisage changing it; I mean what dominates it" (Lacan 2007: 207). In his later works (not before 1968) in the course of his ongoing endeavors to theorize subjectivity, making use of linguistics, Lacan introduced a quadratic

category of discourses to formulate the structure of the intersubjective relations in society (Lacan 2007). As I see it, Lacan, by introducing *Four Discourses*, did not intend to simply inaugurate a new system of signification considering the fact that he had already developed concepts such as *point de capiton* (Seminar III), *Das Ding* (Seminar VII) and *Objet Petit a* (Seminar X). In this regard, he writes, “The fact is that, in truth, discourse can dearly subsist without words” (Lacan 2007: 12) and There are structures...for characterizing what can be extracted from this "in the form," one particular usage of which I took the liberty of stressing last year—namely, what happens by virtue of a fundamental relation, the one I define as the relation of one signifier to another” (2007: 12). From his perspective, these discourses are speech-free yet they ultimately become settled in speech: “The discourses in question are nothing other than the signifying articulation, the apparatus whose presence, whose existing status alone dominates and governs anything that at any given moment is capable of emerging as speech” (2007: 166).

According to Clemens and Grigg (2006: 4), the four discourses for Lacan is what soul is to Aristotle in the process of thinking. Lacan’s four discourses include: the master’s discourse, the hysteric’s discourse, the analyst’s discourse, and the university discourse. “Lacan argues that a subject can take different “positions” in respect to its reception of discourse. In his theory of the four discourses Lacan shows how four distinct discourse systems – discourse of the university, discourse of the master, discourse of the hysteric, and discourse of the analyst – are produced by differing subject positions that the subject takes in relation to discourse” (Bracher et al. 1994: 42). In my judgment, Lacan’s formulation of discourses conduces to a historical theory to vie with Marxist understanding of history in the sense that, other than the master’s discourse, the modern experience has given rise to two alternative discourses i.e. university and hysterical as a result of which a new discourse has emerged, i.e. analyst discourse, as a response to these two alternatives. Lacan’s broadly-discussed theory of the four discourses suggests that a structural model not only demarcates but also formulates the discursive significations that construct social reality (Lacan 2007). In other words, from Lacan’s perspective, discourse is tantamount to a social link, which implies that the different discourses affect and regulate certain socio-political frameworks that arbitrate social developments, relations and practices in distinctive manners. In order to arrive at a socio-political understanding of Lacan’s discourses, and in the case of this research, an understanding of the semiosis that results in the production of the new sign, it is essential that we break down the different ways in which discourses are able to affect a large enough number of

society members to bring about changes at the social level. This is only possible through Lacan's own sketch of four underlying structures of discourse introduced in *Seminar XVII* which according to Bracher, "produce, respectively, four fundamental social effects: (1) educating/indoctrinating; (2) governing/commanding; (3) desiring/protesting; (4) analyzing/transforming/revolutionizing" (1993: 53). Further, Lacan notes how distinctively structured discourses both regulate and produce parameters such as alienation, values, knowledge and enjoyment and these parameters yield the above-mentioned social effects. The different effects produced by these discourses are the direct consequence of the different positions taken by the four mentioned parameters. These positions are: *agent*, *truth*, *other*, and *production*. The first position is the position of agency (the dominant factor), which is overt and active in a discourse. In fact, the agent is driving forward the discursive activity. The second position, i.e. truth, is the factor that subtends, underpins and brings about the dominant factor (agent) or gives the means to its possibility. The position of the other constitutes the factor in the receiving subject that is directly affected by the agent. Finally, the fourth position is what is produced as a result of the signification process. It is essential to note that these positions are by no means discrete and separate from one another but they actively interact and affect one another. To wit, the agent calls the other into action; the possibility to address itself to the other for the agent is driven from the truth; truth, at the same time, exerts influence on the other; the factor that creates the product is the other; the product affects the agent and the cycle starts over again. Since every act of semicide includes a perpetrator (the dominant factor), a subjective ground (truth, ideology, etc.) and a victim (the other), we can make use of the four positions to explain the ongoing semiosis among the factors, the semiotic process through which semicidal measures are implemented and the final result (the production of the new sign), which is summarized in the model below:

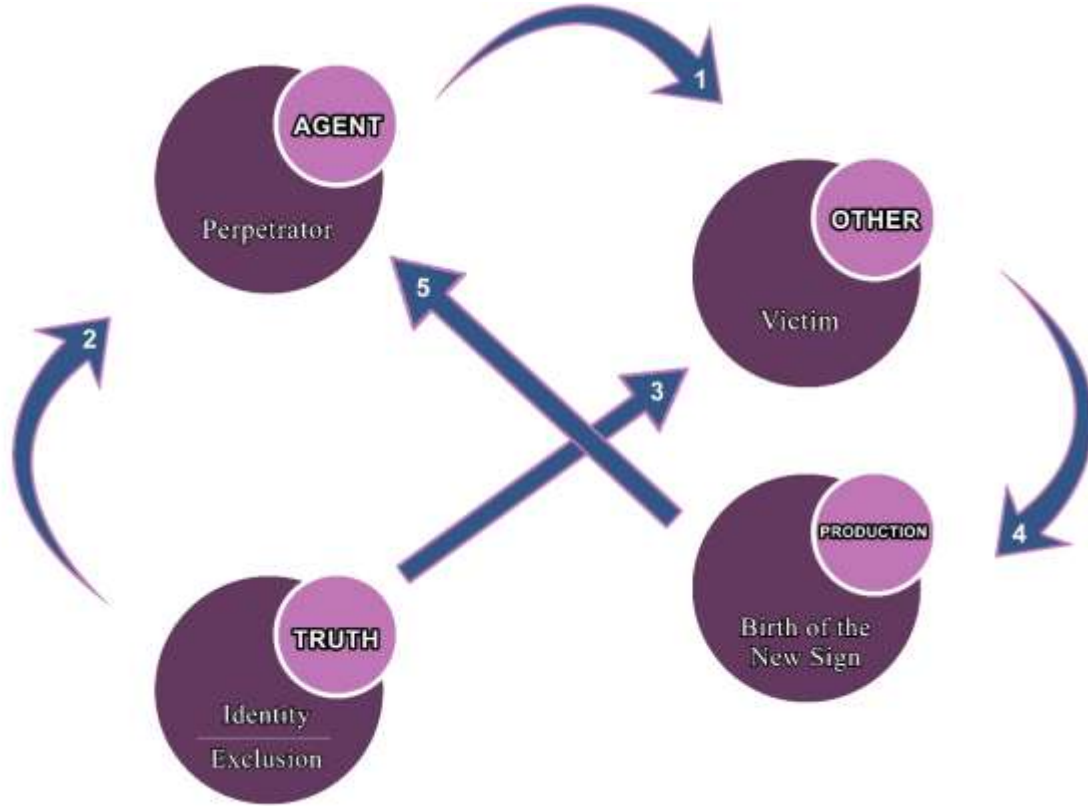


Figure 3: Semiocide as a Discursive Semiosis

As can be seen in the model, the cycle in which a sign is born following the act of semiocide can be summarized in six principal stages:

1. The *agent* (perpetrator of semiocide) acts upon and influences the *other* (the victim of semiocide).
2. Truth¹ is a twopartite position⁴ that simultaneously influences the *agent* and the *other*. What enables the *agent* to fulfill the othering process, separate itself from the *other* and to act upon the *other* comes from below, i.e. identity (a component of *truth*).

¹ The term *truth* can be misleading in this model. However, in order not to depart from Lacanian tradition, I decided to keep the term. It must neither be taken as a discursive activity within a discourse nor a distinct ideology. It is merely to be taken, as Žižek also explains (1995: 210), the 'desire' of the *agent*. In other words, *truth* is a (repressed) element that motivates the actions of the *agent*.

3. Taking the socio-political context within which the *other* is situated, exclusion is executed on the *other* (a component of *truth*).
4. The *other* transforms from an object into a subject through reaction and resistance against the dominant factor and the act of semiocide.
5. Following the act of semiocide, the *other*, now a subject, is going to produce a *product* (a new sign). This is a response, whether intentional or not, by the *other* to the atrocities of the *agent*.
6. The new sign fires back at the *agent* and the *agent* as a response tries to suppress it and this effort to suppress (destroy) the new sign is the starting point for the process to reoccur. In this way this cycle starts over again.

Each of the positions above is a signifier with a sense associated with it (interpretant) and a signified (object), which means one sign, with its integrants, leads to another which leads to another in a potentially unceasing chain of signification to form a cycle. In this regard, Lacan, in Seminar XX, maintains that “The subject is nothing other than what slides in a chain of signifiers, whether he knows which signifier he is the effect of or not. That effect – the subject – is the intermediary effect between what characterizes a signifier and another signifier, namely, the fact that each of them, each of them is an element” (1999: 50). This understanding is very close to Peircean notion of infinite semiosis where interpretant is determined by a particular sign – interpretant itself being a sign – which inevitably seems to result in infinite semiosis (1931: 339). In other words, the signified works for its part as a signifier for the next signified. Hodge and Kress highlight that Peirce conceives two limits to the infinitude of the semiosis. One is that the object with material existence controls the relations between sign and interpretant. The other is that the seemingly unlimited chain of interpretants is controlled by what Peirce calls cultural ‘habit’ (1988: 20). Similarly, the infinitude of semiosis in semiocide is limited by the production of the new sign by the *other* that run counter to the cultural ‘habit’. Needless to say that this limit does not mean an abrupt cessation of semiosis but a slingshot to the agent, which starts the infinite cycle explained above.

A clear case in point is the production of a new sign, i.e. Khavaran, as a result of the 1988 regime-led semiocide in Iran. According to Amnesty International (2018a), Khavaran is a cemetery in the southeastern part of Tehran, which accommodates the remains of different religious minorities

such as people of Bahai faith, along with Marxists, leftists, and other political dissidents and the victims whom, based on Islamic Sharia, are called non-believers. Amanat (2017: 274) writes about the history of Kavaran:

In the early 1980s, following a fatwa by Ayatollah Khomeini barring the burial of infidels (kuffar) in Muslim cemeteries, a group of his supporters took the initiative of exhuming the graves of leftist activists who had been executed in 1981 from Tehran's Muslim cemetery and reburying them at Khatunabad, a site in southeastern Tehran also later known as Kufrabad (infidel land) or La'natabad (accursed land) but more commonly known as Khavaran.

Khavaran later became the burial site of thousands of political prisoners who were executed in the summer of 1988 following a decree issued by Ruhollah Khomeini, the former supreme leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Following the 1988 atrocities, Khavaran became a symbol for the oppression that the regime inflicted on political dissidents in the modern political discourse in Iran and has been present on the banners and in the chants of street protestors ever since. It has also created international concerns an example of which is Reynaldo Galindo Pohl's (United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Iran between 1986–1995) reference to Khavaran and buried prisoners in the site in his report. In this way, the new sign. i.e. Khavaran, has fired back at the agent and the agent (the Islamist regime), as a response, has made several efforts to not only suppress but destroy it. An exemplar of this is Mothers of Khavaran, "An organization formed by women who had lost their children in the mass executions following the first decade of the 1979 'Islamic' revolution in Iran." (Barlow 2008: 84), who have, despite being the target of pressure from the authorities, harassment and arrests, have endeavored to seek justice and truth through non-violent methods. The paragraph below is an extract from the message sent by Mothers of Khavaran to the Truth Commission regarding Khavaran-related semiocidal atrocities held at the Amnesty International Human Rights Action Centre in London on 17 June 2012:

...Since the 1980s we have been in search of truth [to] find out why, for what reason and under what charges, were our beloved children killed. We waited for 30 years for an answer from the authorities of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Not only they did not offer any answers, nor did they ever admit to their heinous crime, instead, throughout the years they coerced us, detained us, and stopped us from visiting Khavaran. The authorities went even so far as depriving us from holding memorials commemorating the loss of our loved daughters and sons. We know our story is the sad story of all mothers, spouses, fathers, sisters, brothers and children, who similarly lost their loved ones in mass killings in prisons throughout Iran. (Akhavan 2017: 84)

In his report, Ahmed Shaheed, UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Iran (2011–2016) highlighted continuing persecution and intimidation of individuals and organizations that

make an effort to look for information regarding those who have gone missing or who seek truth or justice or mourn for those who were massacred (United Nations, 2013). Human rights organizations, Amnesty International being the most vocal in this case, have recurrently condemned Iranian regime's deliberate destruction of mass graves of victims of 1988 massacres in Khavaran. In April 2018(a), Amnesty International reported "the Iranian authorities are bulldozing, constructing buildings and roads, dumping rubbish or building new burial plots over mass grave sites". The regime (the agent in our model) has persecuted the individuals (the other in our model) who have tried to sustain the concept of Khavaran in its semiotic sense and perpetrate the message, which has maintained the semiosis, given rise to new signs – i.e. Iran People's Tribunal, "a grassroots initiative that may be loosely described as an unofficial but credible truth commission in exile. It was inspired by the implacable demands for justice by the 'Mothers of Khavaran'" (Barlow 2008: 84) – and led to the cycle starting over again.

In other words, the agent, on the basis of religiopolitical truth, acted upon the other (victims of semiocide) during 1988 atrocities. The victims, in an order of transforming into subjects, produced (or became the grounds for the production of) a new sign (Khavaran). The new sign (has) fired back at the agent of semiocide and the agent (has) as a response endeavored to destroy the new sign. This effort to suppress the product by the agent has resulted in the process to start over again and give birth to other new products (signs), such as Mothers of Khavaran, Iran Tribunal, memorials, Trial of Hamid Nouri¹, etc. in this discursive sēmiosis.

On balance, premeditated semiocide as a political plan of action, as shown above, can never prove to be a success for its perpetrators since it constitutes a repeating cycle of semiosis, meaning signs are not only completely destroyed but give birth to new signs, which throws the agents of semiocide in a Sisyphean cycle and prods them to resort to more violence to destroy the newly-produced signs. As Hannah Arendt once noted, "The practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is a more violent world" (1996: 80).

¹ An Iranian official involved in 1988 massacre of political dissidents detained by the Swedish in November 2019 after a tip-off by one of the survivors. This, ongoing, trial has become a new signifier in the political discourse of Iran and has been named as the biggest justice-seeking campaign with regard to 1988 semiocide.

Conclusion

The mission to bring semiocide in the political realm, which impressed one as a leap in the dark at the outset due to a dearth of apposite literature, hereby, comes to a conclusion, having synthesized comparative and analytic approaches and investigated cases of semiocide at a global scale, with the following results:

Semiocide, initially defined as “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” by Ivar Puura (2002) falls under two taxonomic groups: premeditated (comprised of negatory and celebratory) and unpremeditated (comprised of biotic and inadvertent) and is not exclusively subject to human agency. In addition, semiocide can serve as an effectual theoretical framework for studying cultural genocides. This is due to the fact that in cases of cultural genocide semiotic regimes attempt to either eradicate existing sign systems, replace existing signs systems or homologize existing sign systems all of which constitute an attack on the signs that are important for a particular semiosphere and its inhabitants, i.e. semiocide.

Credocide, which is the practice of collectively wiping out holders of divergent set of beliefs (and subsequently signs that are important for holders of such beliefs) with guiding functions for their holders in respect to their role within a hegemonic semiotic sphere is an obvious yet unrecognized form of semiocide. Clear cases in point are the large-scale state-sponsored executions and prison massacres occurred across Iran in 1988 and the semiocidal practices perpetrated against the people of Bahai faith in Iran and the ensuing warfare on the identity and the consequential signs for the victims and the bereaved.

The *modus operandi* for semiocide is not only subjective but also objective violence, which can come in various forms of subtle coercion, intimidation, renaming and de-naming places of cultural significance, restricting use of tongue, etc. Violent practices as such are at times considered as normal state of affairs since they can be incorporated into individuals’ subjectivity through habitualization. Having said that, violence in the context of premeditated semiocide, is transposable by political violence in which 1) agents of violence are structures such as legal apparatuses, armed forces and cultural institutions and 2) violence is perpetrated in order to achieve a political goal.

Identity building and exclusion in the sense of semiotic creation of an ‘other’ who is actively being expelled from the core of a particular semiosphere and is, therefore, regarded to be outside the sphere of moral obligation precede any act of premeditated semiocide. The foremost exclusionary mechanisms that lead to semiocidal practices can be recapitulated as the following: autocommunication, homo-sacerization, necropolitics, mythologization of the other and depluralization. However, in certain semiotic spheres and cultural contexts, such as the Macedonian minority within Greek semiosphere, the flip side of exclusion, i.e. inclusion can precede semiocide, which is when the coercion from the hegemonic culture takes the form of an imposed assimilation.

Finally, any practice of semiocide is a discursive semiosis (comprised of agent, truth, the other and production) and ends in the eternal return of a new sign. In this sense, there is no consummation point or follow-up achievement for semiocidal processes, which makes it an already fractured plan of action for semiocidal regimes.

This thesis has not detailed the sociogeny of semiocide, in a Fanonian sense, or the possible constructive effects or forms of semiocide, which leaves undiscovered grounds for further research for interested future researchers.

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Estonian Summary

Kokkuvõtte

Semiotsiidi Poliitilise Teooria Poole

Eesti paleontoloog Ivar Puura määratles semiotsiidi esimest korda järgmiselt: “olukorda, kus kellegi pahatahtlikkuse või hoolimatuse tõttu hävitatakse kellegi teise jaoks tähendusrikkaid märke ja lugusid, röövides osa tema identiteedist. Argielus tuleb seda sageli ette ainelise või vaimse vägivalla vormina nii laste kui ka “suurte” hulgas” (Puura 2002). semiotsiidi poliitilisest vaatenurgast ei ole varasemates töödes piisavalt käsitletud. Käesoleva lõputöö eesmärk on uurida semiotsiidi poliitilisest vaatenurgast. Käesoleva lõputöö metoodika on võrdlus ja analüüs ning juhtumianalüüs. Semiotsiidil võib olla kaks vormi: ettekavatsetud ja ettekavatsemata. Semiotsiidi ei tee alati inimesed. Semiotsiidi peamine tööriist on vägivald. Vägivald võib olla subjektiivne ja objektiivne vägivald. Objektiivne vägivald võib väljenduda hirmutamise ja vägivallaga ähvardamise vormis.

Ettekavatsetud semiotsiidi puhul on vägivald võrdne poliitilise vägivallaga. Poliitiline vägivald on struktureeritud ja seda tehakse poliitilise eesmärgi saavutamiseks. Kredotsiid on semiotsiidi vorm. Kredotsiidi näide on Iraani poliitvangide hukkamine 1988. aastal ja Bahai kogukonna tagakiusamine Iraanis.

Minu idee on, et identiteedi loomine ja tõrjumine on enne semiotsiidi. Identiteedi loomine toimub enamasti autokommunikatsiooni abil. Käesolevas lõputöös on uuritud üle 10 semiotsiidi juhtumise. Tuginedes uuritud juhtumitele ja poliitiliste mõtlejate, nagu Arendt, Agamben, Barthes ja Mbembe, teooriatele, olen koostanud tõrjutuse mudeli, mis on enne semiotsiidi. Mõnel juhul võib semiotsiid juhtuda sunniviisilise assimilatsiooni tulemusena. See on siis, kui hegemooniline pool püüab hävitada märke ja likvideerida ohvrite identiteeti.

Selle uurimistöö tulemusena selgus, et semiotsiid on ebamäärane semioos. Igal semiotsiidi juhtumil on neli elementi: "agent", "tõde", "teine" ja "toode". See tähendab, nagu on näidatud mudelis, et semiotsiidil ei saa kunagi olla lõpp-punkti ja mis tahes semiotsiidil tekib uus märk. See muudab semiotsiidi poliitiliste režiimide jaoks ebaõnnestunud strateegiaks.

I have written the Master Thesis myself, independently. All of the other authors' texts, main viewpoints and all data from other resources have been referred to.

Author: Erfan Fatehi

26.05.2022

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