

Political dimension of the violence against cities. Urbicide in Palestine – a case study.

In the post-Cold War era the deliberate destruction of the built environment in inter- and intra-state conflicts has captured the attention of international observers and analysts. Most notorious cases of this kind of violence include the demolition of urban environment during the 1992-95 Bosnian War, Russian destructive tactics during the Chechen campaigns of 1994–96 and 1999–2000, Israeli policies of house demolition on the Occupied Territories, or shattering of many Iraqi and Syrian cities in the early 21st century. Even though historically there had been numerous cases of rubbleization of cities, striking in the abovementioned cases was massive, systematic, and deliberate character of destruction. The issue is especially worth exploring due to the currently changing patterns of war, which nowadays centers more on localized struggles over strategic urban territories. Although the destruction of different kinds of buildings has been widely acknowledged in the literature of the field, the thorough theorization of this process remains undeveloped. This concerns both the nature of urbicidal violence, philosophical and cultural groundings of such violence, its scale, as well as how its contemporary forms are situated in the context of the history of urban militarism. One of the reasons why the nature of violence against cities remains an unexplored issue of political theory is the fact that it has typically been considered just a dimension of other forms of violence (e.g., aggression against peoples or individuals) and therefore has been regarded as secondary to the genocidal projects. Contrary to these assumptions, the project aims to test the hypothesis that deliberate destruction of the built environment should be treated as a separate form of political violence. The major objective of this project is to delineate a conceptual understanding of contemporary acts of widespread and deliberate destruction of the built environment in Palestine as well as explore the politics of memory and resistance toward this form of political violence. The complementary objective of this research is to introduce a new materialist approach as a theoretical and methodological perspective to study international relations in general, and urbicide in particular.

The research team intends to offer an analysis of the destruction of built environment accompanying (ethno)national tension on Palestinian territories. This will shed light on both the range of urbicidal tactics employed in contemporary warfare in this particular location as well as enhance understanding of this form of political violence in this specific geographical and political context. In order to give a more complete picture of currently employed forms of violence against the city and urbanity in Palestine, the research team will elaborate 4 detailed case studies of the relatively undocumented instances of urbicide in this region. They would include cases of demolishing cities (e.g. Ramallah, Nablus), urban territories comprising cities and villages (e.g. Gaza Strip), and refugee camps (e.g. Jenin, Nahr al Barid). By approaching these cases of urbicidal, the research project focuses on relatively undocumented and untheorized instances of violence against urbanity, acknowledging the complex material-semiotic character of the urban space, as well as of its destruction.

This research is important and timely due to a number of reasons. 1) Given the fact, that urbanization has been systematically increasing, the violence against the cities has become a pressing problem in the 21st century. The year 2007 marks a milestone in human social organization as from then on, for the first time in history, more people would live in cities than in the countryside. This has a huge impact on how (intra- and international) politics are enacted. 2) Cities have become key sites in which military and geopolitical conflicts are being fought. In the context of intensifying global urbanization, the military interest in the role of the cities has been increasing. 3) Cities have become the most common destination for migrants and refugees, which contributes to the growing ethnic diversity of the urban space and often intensifies ethnic tensions. 4) Tackling urbicide is important as the narratives on the devastation and erasure of cities advance knowledge on the crucial moment of the city life, namely its destruction. The focus on resistance strategies turns attention to the devastated communities and their experiences of war, that is, to stories so often silenced in the dominant accounts of politics.

In order to understand the significance and complexity of urbicide, the project adopts a new materialist research perspective that captures the intricacy of the material spaces and their cultural meanings as well as how these entanglements translate in perceptions of identity and difference, so crucial for (ethno) national conflicts. Even though urban territories, constituting a conglomerate of material spaces and discursive regimes, represent a good material for analysis from a new materialist point of view, the work on cities and violence against them from this theoretical perspective has not yet been undertaken. The objective of the project will be achieved through application of a number of research methods, involving historical analysis, quantitative and qualitative studies, and elaboration of a number of case studies.