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Necropolitical Violence and Alevis

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Summary

The concept of necropolitical violence offers valuable potential for clarifying the meaning and significance of the Alevi community's status as an oppressed minority and its collective/historical victimhood. One may argue that necropolitical violence manifests in multiple forms: (i) epistemic violence based on the appropriation of history and memory and the construction of the "acceptable" Alevi; (ii) institutional discrimination and cultural/symbolic violence that suspend livability; and (iii) ongoing physical violence and massacres. When approached from a social/political psychological perspective, it becomes apparent that Alevis are able to adopt various lines of resistance against necropolitical violence, grounded in memory and identity struggles as well as in the defense of a cultural worldview rooted in belief-theosophy.

Definition and Scope

One of the most widely employed theoretical frameworks for analyzing violence is Galtung's (1990) "triangle of violence" model, which classifies violence into direct, structural, and cultural forms. This model moves beyond the level of individual analysis and explanation, rendering social inequalities visible. However, it often presents violence as a phenomenon with an obscured perpetrator, failing to adequately identify its political agent. In contrast, Mbembe (2003), through the concept of *necropolitics* developed within the framework of postcolonial critique, renders the political agent of violence both visible and debatable by conceptualizing sovereignty not as the power to manage life, but as the capacity to dictate death. Mbembe extends Foucault's (1975/2008) notion of biopolitics—which defined modern power as the ability to "make live and let die"—by arguing that power not only regulates life, but also strategically organizes death. This perspective intersects with Agamben's (1998/2013) notions of "state of exception" and "bare life," revealing how sovereign power renders disadvantaged social groups continuously exposed to violence by excluding them from the protection of the law.

In the context of Turkey, necropolitical violence has taken different forms and employed various mechanisms across distinct political regimes—including the single-party era, periods of military rule, and multi-party democratic governance. Practices

such as the systematic failure to disclose the fate of the forcibly disappeared, the life-threatening neglect of prison conditions, and the bureaucratic obstruction of death certificates, burial permits, and identity documents exemplify necropolitical mechanisms that render life unsustainable for social groups such as Kurds, queer individuals, women, conscientious objectors, political prisoners, and refugees (Bargu 2019). In this regard, necropolitical violence may be understood not merely as the act of killing, but as a constitutive practice of a political order aimed at making the lives of certain groups unlivable, invisible, and precarious. In the case of Alevis, this conceptualization offers a framework not only for analyzing past massacres, but also for examining the ongoing forms of exclusion, erasure, and devaluation that persist as current realities. In doing so, necropolitical violence provides a theoretical ground for understanding both the Alevi experience of living lives constantly encircled by the threat of death as an ethno-religious minority, and the forms and strategies of resistance they have developed in response to this condition.

The Faces of Necropolitical Violence from the Perspective of Alevis

As an ethno-religious minority historically subjected to long-standing oppression, Alevis engage in a struggle for existence shaped by collective/historical victimhood and, in particular, the experience of massacres. The massacres perpetrated by Yavuz Sultan Selim in the Ottoman period, as well as the massacres in Dersim, Maraş, Çorum, Sivas-Madımak, and Gazi during the Republican era, and more recently, the genocidal violence targeting Syrian Alevis—going beyond the notion of massacre—are concrete examples of this history. In this context, killing or being killed has functioned not merely as a physical end, but as a persistent regime of threat that has shaped Alevi identity. Concepts such as the “climate of ethnocide” and “the construction of the Alevi as a Muselmann” (Yalçınkaya 2005; 2014), the role of massacres as a structural element of politicization (Ertan 2017), and the exposure of Alevis—as a racialized community—to forms of violence ranging from lynching to pogroms, massacres, and genocidal attacks (Yonucu 2025), may all be read as traces of necropolitical violence. In Mbembe’s (2003) terms, necropolitics refers to the sovereign power to determine the boundary between life and death. Within this framework, physical violence targeting Alevis entails not only biological extermination, but the systematic subjection of identity to death—indeed, the infusion of death into the fabric of everyday life. This killing regime, continually reproduced through impunity and denial, traps Alevi identity within a constant threat of death. Therefore, “physical violence and massacres” correspond to the most direct and exposed dimension of necropolitical violence experienced by Alevis.

Alevis can be understood to experience a second face of necropolitical violence in the

form of the “suspension of livability”. From Butler’s (2004) perspective, a livable life is determined not merely by biological existence but by conditions of social recognition and acceptability. In this framework, the institutional discrimination to which Alevis are subjected indicates a deprivation of livable life. For instance, the Presidency of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of National Education have consistently operated as implementers of discriminatory legal regulations that deliberately produce, maintain, and reproduce social hierarchies and inequalities. Examples such as the construction of mosques in Alevi villages, the statute of limitations applied to the Madımak Massacre—regarded as a crime against humanity—or naming the third Bosphorus bridge after Yavuz Sultan Selim, the Ottoman sultan responsible for massacres of Alevis, are illustrative instances of this dynamic in varying degrees. Furthermore, cultural and symbolic violence manifests in various forms in everyday life: the “mum söndü” discourse has evolved from a form of interpersonal moral exclusion and denigration into a socially legitimized form of structural stigmatization. Historical terms such as *râfizî*, *mülhid*, and *zındık* may be seen as earlier examples of such stigmatization (see Aydın 2017). As in the cases of marking Alevi homes or the impunity granted to hate speech in media outlets, these practices may not constitute an overt political form of violence comparable to massacres, but they nonetheless gain indirect legitimacy through impunity, silence, and disregard. The erasure of Alevi memory and the refusal to confront the past—for example, choosing to name the site in Sivas a “Science and Culture Center” instead of a “Museum of Shame”—deepens the sense of injustice in collective memory. What these examples share is the systematic deprivation of Alevi identity from equal, visible, and secure existence in public life. The suspension of livability, therefore, represents a face of necropolitical violence that does not kill directly but produces lives exposed to death. In this context, the statement “Alevis: They Exist, Yet Do Not Exist; They Do Not Exist, Yet Exist” which served as the title of a speech delivered in the Grand National Assembly of Turkey by Geçmez (2015), president of the Hacı Bektaş Veli Anatolian Culture Foundation, may at first seem like a tautological phrase, but when considered alongside the examples mentioned above and others, it symbolically encapsulates the political violence and pressure inherent in the suspension of livability.

The third face of necropolitical violence consists of practices of exclusion and rendering identity ambiguous that operate on an epistemic level. In this context, Alevi identity is targeted not only through physical or institutional repression, but also through domination in the field of knowledge. What may be called the “construction of the ‘acceptable Alevi’ through epistemic violence” involves not only the denial of the right to define or make sense of group identity, but also functions through the seizure of history and memory. In other words, the designation as an oppressed minority corresponds to a form of subalternity in which the right to speak and to self-definition

is suppressed (Spivak 1999/2020). The Alevi Workshops are a concrete example of this: in the final report, Alevism is defined as “the path, conduct, and ritual practices of non-Sunni Anatolian Muslims who harbor deep love and respect for the Prophet Muhammad and his family, especially Ali and his descendants” (AÇNR 2010, 39). This definition reflects both Islamic reductionism and a narrowing of ethnic, cultural, and historical plurality (see Aydın 2017; Gezik 2015). Beyond the workshops, origin myths that threaten the syncretic texture of Alevism can also be seen as part of this broader tendency. Considering the modernist and positivist impulses underlying the hegemonic-controlling approach, defining Alevis not by making room for their self-definitions but by confining them to an “acceptable” mold is seen as politically expedient (Ecevitoğlu 2011). In this light, epistemic violence manifests as one of the less visible yet constitutive faces of necropolitical violence—through processes of alienation and the construction of the “acceptable Alevi.”

Repertoire of Resistance to Necropolitical Violence: A Social/Political Psychological Assessment

Conforming to the mold of the “acceptable Alevi” by appealing to legitimizing myths or out-group favoritism can be interpreted as passive forms of adaptation developed in response to the threat posed by necropolitical violence. According to System Justification Theory (Jost, Banaji, and Nosek 2004), individuals may tend to perceive the status quo as legitimate and fair, even when it involves inequality and violence, in order to maintain psychological security in the face of uncertainty and instability. Strategies framed in this way can be understood as efforts to cope with the existential anxiety and cognitive dissonance triggered by necropolitical pressure and threat. However, the focus here is not on the Alevi subject’s adaptation to this regime of violence but rather on the lines of resistance developed in response to it.

Cultural worldview grounded in the belief-theosophy of Alevism, and collective well-being. In the face of the salience of death perpetuated by necropolitical violence, the Alevi subject may defend a cultural worldview grounded in the belief-theosophy of Alevism as a line of resistance. As an existential-social psychological variant, Terror Management Theory (Pyszczynski et al. 2015) posits that the existential anxiety caused by the awareness of death is regulated through adherence to cultural worldviews and sources of self-esteem. Turning to a cultural worldview grounded in the belief-theosophy of Alevism may offer a powerful psychosocial means of coping with chronic death salience.

For example, rituals such as standing vigil for Mansur and the mourning/fasting of Muharram; discursive expressions like “walking toward the truth” or “may it be

eternal"; the Husayni stance, the ideal of becoming a perfect human being, and the theosophical motif of "dying before dying"; the esoteric principle of "not revealing the secret" and the preservation of belief through the concealment of identity; and narratives such as Ali conducting his own funeral or Pir Sultan's "dies, dies, and is resurrected" can all be seen as diverse manifestations of "taming death."[1] Moreover, taming death can be read not merely as a psychological act but as a collective counter-hegemonic production of meaning that disrupts the state's monopoly over death. These phenomena, described by Zırh (2014) as institutionalized belonging in the form of martyrdom ("children of Karbala"), point to a qualitative transformation of the concept of death through a historicity that spans *from Karbala to Gezi*. Additionally, it can be inferred that the strong group identification accompanied by engagement with a cultural worldview adorned with belief-based theosophical elements may support the community's psychological resilience and collective well-being in response to collective traumas projected by necropolitical violence (Akpınar 2021; Jetten et al. 2017).

Memory struggle, social representations of history and Alevism. It can be argued that non-recognition, denial, or assimilation through the imposition of the "acceptable Alevi" points to necropolitical violence at an epistemic level. Social Representations Theory "provides many valuable tools with which to prise open the dialectic of psychological processes and social practices and so examine the legitimization of different knowledge systems and the possibilities for resistance" (Howarth 2006, 80). Social representations do not passively reflect social reality; rather, they reconstruct this reality through collective meaning-making against imposed norms (Elcheroth, Doise, and Reicher 2011). A qualitative study involving 39 Alevi participants from different ethnic backgrounds clearly demonstrated that diverse social representations of Alevism indicate that Alevis do not perceive Alevism as an entirely vague or ambiguous phenomenon (Karlıdağ and Göregenli 2017): alongside an understanding of Alevism as an integrated whole of belief/values/theosophy/philosophy, shared group identity within social life and content based on intra- and inter-group social comparisons were found to be decisive in the social representations of Alevism. Although views that the bond with Alevism is eroding in urban life or that Alevism is an "outsider" experience for Alevis (Ecevitoğlu 2011) are valid, practices such as naming children, the Pir Sultan figurine in shop windows, the *bağlama* on the wall, or engagement with oral culture indicate, in terms of shared values, ideas, and practices, the continuity of cultural capital.

Beyond these everyday realities and practices, social representations of history and/or collective memory (Liu and Hilton 2005) constitute an important subject of inquiry. According to findings from two separate studies conducted with Alevi participants,

collective memory in the context of Alevism is almost tantamount to a catalogue of massacres (Karlıdağ and Göregenli 2017). Moreover, in association-based representations concerning Alevi-Sunni intergroup relations, which correspond to 51% of the codings, the most prevalent theme is “violence, victimhood, and discrimination” (Karlıdağ 2020), which is striking. The preservation of traumatic memory through remembrance, transmission, or (re)activation can be read as a silent yet resilient memory struggle against necropolitical violence.[2] The shared emotions inherent to this memory struggle, including anger, hope, fear, and other possible collective emotional orientations (Halperin and Bar-Tal 2011), require consideration at both the individual and social movement levels.

Quest for a livable public life inherent to the identity struggle. Geçmez’s (2015) speech[3] points to the existence struggle of Alevis in a manner that supports an inclusive narrative of victimhood (Yildiz and Verkuyten 2011) in the face of collective victimization woven through institutional discrimination, hate crimes, and necropolitical violence. This also indicates, beyond the Alevi group identity, Alevis’ shared humanity-based self-categorization: the centrality of identity elements such as “I am someone who does not look at a person’s language, race, or nation” and “I am a friend to all living beings” in their identity definition reveals that the notion of shared humanity, alongside Alevism’s ancient belief-based narrative, presently occupies a place in the Alevis’ identity repertoire. The theme of “humanity identity and ethical stance” in in-group representations also supports this (Karlıdağ and Kuşdil 2021). The self-categorization anchored in the notion of humanity can be regarded as a distinctive identity management strategy from the perspective of Social Identity Approach (Reicher, Haslam, and Spears 2010). This framework may also open doors to other social/political psychological readings around topics such as the motivational bases of identity and collective action tendencies.

Primarily centered on an original discourse toward humanity and the demand for equal citizenship, rights advocacy can, so to speak, precede group identity or shape the character of the identity struggle. As Ertan (2017) states, this “identity-less identity politics” has served as a way to overcome a long history of massacres (that is, necropolitical violence as conceptualized here). This struggle, shaped by the demand for equal citizenship in the public sphere, can be understood not only as a pursuit of visibility based on identity but also as a political expression of the felt relative deprivation (Wright 2010) experienced in the face of the persistence of institutional and symbolic inequalities. These assessments of social identity, intergroup relations, and Alevi politicization and social movement reveal a strong quest for livability in public life under the siege of necropolitical violence.

Conclusion

The concept of necropolitical violence requires a multifaceted interpretation from the perspective of Alevis. Forms such as biopolitical or epistemic violence could, of course, be considered as separate or singular categories. However, necropolitical violence is not limited to direct acts of killing but also includes policies that condemn individuals and communities to a “state of waiting” between life and death. Therefore, an approach centered on the politics of death and killing has been adopted. Accordingly, physical violence and massacres, biopolitical pressures operating through the suspension of livability, and epistemic domination-violence based on the usurpation of history and memory have been conceptualized holistically as three faces of necropolitical violence.

Although the lines or repertoires of resistance developed against these three dimensions may appear analytically distinct, it can be inferred that sharp boundaries do not exist in practice. In other words, the Alevi subject’s defense of a cultural worldview grounded in belief-theosophy may simultaneously construct struggles over memory and identity or transition from one to the other.[4] Moreover, it should be considered that different forms of resistance may emerge in specific times and contexts against necropolitical violence. Intersectionality of identity in terms of ethnic identities, the contexts of Turkey and the diaspora, and particular perspectives on the Alevi Social Movement and Alevi organizations, such as associations and foundations, may provide valuable insights. Within this framework, while outlining distinct contours, the dominant effort was an understanding based on the social and political psychology literature, which is noted to be lacking in Alevism studies. This plural repertoire of resistance against necropolitical violence expresses Alevis’ collective effort to establish their social existence.

Endnotes

[1]: The expression “taming death” is an interpretive usage inspired by Ariès’s (1975) work.

[2]: A striking example of the reflections of collective memory in everyday life is when someone, usually sensing that the interlocutor is also Alevi, asks, “Are you among the burned or the burners?” This question, referencing the Sivas-Madımak Massacre and invoking self-categorization (us/the burned and them/the burners), constructs identity definitions through a historical memory of violence. Moreover, such verbal practices suggest that the death threat inscribed into memory by necropolitical violence not only keeps collective emotions alive but also transforms memory into a field of

resistance against forgetting. The question “Are you among the burned?” indicates that traumatic memory and its accompanying mourning can be visible even in interpersonal interactions during everyday encounters.

[3]: Some excerpts are as follows (see Geçmez 2015): “In Turkey today, if you are not Turkish, Sunni, male, adult, and heterosexual, you are under threat! (…) Cemevis are not only places of worship for Alevis; they belong to Armenians, Jews, Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans; cemevis belong to the oppressed, the poor, the unemployed, socialists, communists, Kurds, Yazidis, and Arabs. The great hatred towards cemevis is partly because of this. (…) We, the Alevis of this country, no longer want to come together with different identities of this country at funerals. We want to be united not with our dead, but with our living. (…) Let no one do anything for Alevis, but let everyone do something for that great house of equality and friendship!”

[4]: Bükün’s (2014) study provides an example of how the thematic foci of memory and identity, as distinguished above, may overlap: In the case of the negative collective memory event of the Madımak Massacre, the cognitive component of collective memory statistically and positively mediates the relationship between identification with the group and support for collective action.

References & Further Readings

References & Further Readings

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