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URBAN WARFARE, POSTCOLONIAL THEORY, SOCIOMATERIALITY, POLITICAL SUBJECTIVITY, SPACE

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Balcony located in the quarter of al-Jdeideh, the historical center of Aleppo. The majority of the balconies or 'private' spaces, as well as traditional houses that open up to 'public' spaces, were turned into militarized zones and positions of artillery and snipers.

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This contribution examines the concept of urbicide – the deliberate use of urban destruction and the violent reorganisation of city spaces with the aim of denying, annihilating or homogenising place. Through a postcolonial lens, the analysis engages with urbicide as a phenomenon with specific historical conditions of emergence. This approach focuses on how colonial discourses and practices enable modern warfare to justify and conduct operations based on the deliberate destruction of cities. By interrogating these dynamics, the article underscores the socio-political stakes of urbicide and its role in reinforcing hierarchies of domination and exclusion.

# Abstract

The concept of urbicide, or the deliberate destruction of urban spaces, seeks to capture the effects of violence inflicted upon cities and their communities. Coined initially to analyse the urban transformations in 1960s America and made popular in relation to the Bosnian war, urbicide has become a critical lens through which to study the socio-political impacts of urban destruction, particularly in post-Cold War conflicts. Scholars like Martin Coward and Stephen Graham have advanced our understanding of urbicide as a phenomenon that transcends physical destruction and brings to the fore the impact of urban violence upon shared spatiality. For instance, Coward (2009), drawing on the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, emphasises that urbicide transforms cities into homogenous enclaves, erasing diversity and pluralism. Graham (2004; 2007; 2012) extends this perspective by situating urbicide within contemporary war, where targeting urban infrastructure is a tool to incapacitate populations and mechanisms of resistance. For example, in Iraq the destruction of urban systems demodernised society, undermining state functions and political agency. This framing ties urbicide to neo-imperial warfare, militarised urban planning, and global security paradigms.

Crucially, postcolonial scholarship enriches our understanding of urbicide by situating it within colonial continuities and specific processes of subject formation. Derek Gregory's (2004) concept of the "colonial present" underscores how the legacies of colonial power also manifest in the Global South through urban destruction. These processes not only suppress resistance, but also reinforce hierarchical relationships of domination. The work of postcolonial authors such as Achille Mbembe (2003; 2019) allows us to foreground the interplay between biopolitical and necropolitical power logics in instances where sovereign violence seeks to shape urban spaces and populations, in both wartime and peace. In such an understanding urbicide becomes a mechanism to decide whose lives matter, annihilating spaces and communities that are deemed threats to the political order.

A postcolonial approach to urbicide thus highlights the socio-material dimension of urbicide, its productive role in shaping the dynamics of political subjectivity, and the pervasive reverberations of colonial power relations. Pushing Graham's arguments further, the violent reconfiguration of urban and peri-urban spaces throughout the Global South exceeds the temporal and spatial confines of war and armed conflictivity, as state power often mobilises legal, aesthetic and security imperatives to enforce the spatial bifurcation of populations.

However, while urbicidal violence seeks to enforce a totalising closure of space for political agency, critical scholarship shows how political agency persists within and through the gaps left by sovereign power. Resistance emerges through everyday practices that reclaim urban spaces, challenging the erasure of identities and histories. This interplay between power/resistance and destruction/(re)construction underscores the need for contextual, grounded analyses of urbicide, focusing on specific urban geographies and their socio-political struggles.

# 1. Urbicide: A critical genealogy

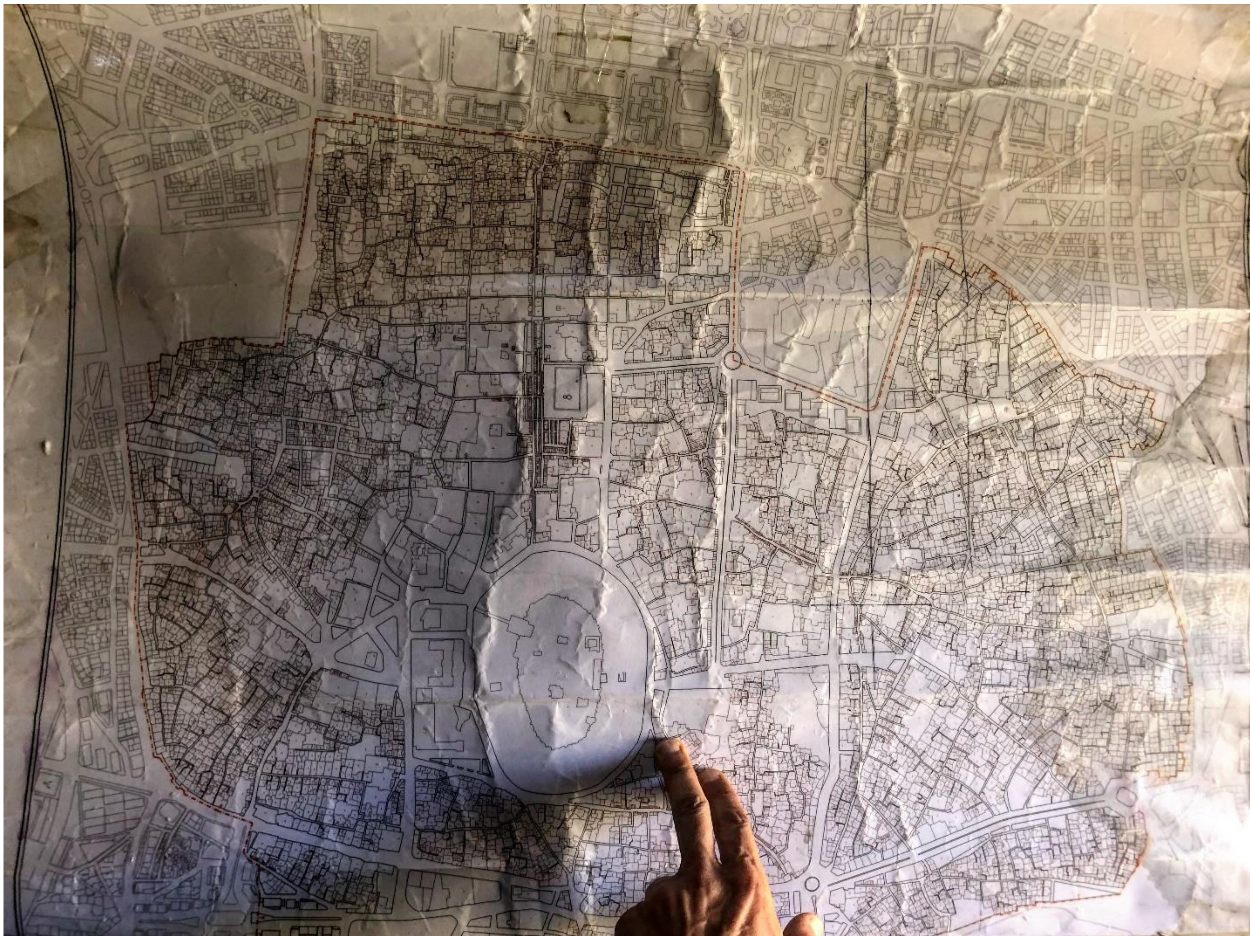
The concept of urbicide emerged to make sense of the aggressive urban transformations that took place throughout the United States during the 1960s and their effects on local communities. However, it was Marshall Berman (1996) who provided the first substantial theorisation of the concept in his study of the South Bronx, linking urbicide to the anti-urban violence present in urban development as these processes erased neighbourhoods and towns, leaving no trace of their victims or culture.

During the Bosnian War the term was rearticulated by architects in Mostar to describe the destruction of the built environment in the former Yugoslavia. Bogdan Bogdanović (1993; 1994), architect and former mayor of Belgrade, framed urbicide as an act of hatred towards the city, targeting its essence as a symbol of civilised urban life. He described the deliberate destruction of towns like Vukovar, Mostar and Sarajevo as actions by 'savage, bestial city destroyers' attacking archives, libraries, museums and places of worship.

Indeed, for Martin Shaw (2004, pp. 141–153) urbicide is integral to genocide, since 'it is what the city represents which is at stake, as much as the existence of its inhabitants and their physical surroundings'. The destruction of cultural symbols, mosques, Bosnian Muslims and their memory appear in this understanding as interrelated – an inseparable phenomenon of a war against urbanity and a civilian population. However, this line of argumentation risks essentialising and opposing urban and rural populations, creating an abstract, de-contextualised, de-historicised account of urbicide.

Since the Cold War urbicide has been extensively applied as a lens through which to understand the socio-political effects of urban destruction. Scholars like Martin Coward (2006; 2009; 2012)

have explored urbicide as a distinct mode of political violence, focusing on its impact on political community. Drawing on Jean-Luc Nancy's concept of community as shared spatiality, Coward argued that urban spaces enable heterogeneity and political interaction. By targeting this shared spatiality, urbicide transforms cities into homogenous enclaves, forcing communities to coexist without sharing the same space. In this view, material destruction is not collateral damage in war-making; but rather a phenomenon that shapes political agency and identity, as political subjectivity and space are co-constituted.



Credits: Garroum Pla – Aleppo, Syria, 2018

Cadastral map of Aleppo. While soldiers of different militias used those maps to find their way and to trace their movements during hostilities, people of Aleppo's historical center are using the maps to recover the original layout of their houses (the majority of which suffered major destruction) to reconstruct them.

Focusing on the War on Terror, Graham (2007, p. 317) shows how the targeting of Iraq's infrastructure 'led, indirectly, to mass civilian casualties, as an urban society was ruthlessly demodernised'. This notion of 'demodernisation' raises a crucial paradox, which I will explore later: while the destruction of infrastructure may appear to undo the material conditions of

modernity, such acts of devastation are deeply embedded in modern rationales, forms of warfare and political control. For Graham, the annihilation of infrastructures renders the declared enemy politically disabled, since the erasure of infrastructures from daily life prevents entire segments of the population from accessing the sphere of the state and means that their possibilities for political agency are considerably suppressed. Hence, in episodes of urbicide cities are geopolitically framed as places that require reorganisation and pacification through neo-imperial forms of war, asymmetric warfare, militarised urban planning, and anti-terrorism strikes. In this view, the hybridity and plurality of socio-cultural identities in the postcolonial world are threatened by the militarisation of urban life and the patterns of segregation, homogenisation and destruction it brings. This militarisation arises not only during times of formal warfare, but also through less boundaried forms of violence such as the War on Terror, where the dividing line between outright war and everyday security measures becomes increasingly blurred.

Contemporary practices of urbicide in the Global South do not emerge in a historical vacuum. Rather than being isolated events, it is essential to recognise their deep embeddedness within longer histories of colonial rule and control. These enduring historical continuities suggest that we must inscribe urbicide into what Derek Gregory (2004) has termed 'the colonial present', since postcolonial spaces remain the subject of several multi-scalar governmental interventions that seek to deny the possibilities for political agency. The persistence of colonial articulations of power and logics of security in the form of the American War on Terror in Iraq or Russian authoritarian intervention in Syria, to name only a couple of examples, is the most evident manifestation of colonial continuities and their inscription of relations of domination within the social fabric. This highlights the importance of developing conceptualisations of urbicide that are attentive to the histories of violence 'as material fact, as lived experience, and as resonant memory' (Gregory & Pred, 2007, p. 2).

This highlights the need to conceptualise and approach urbicide in its historical concrete specificity, paying attention to grounded experiences and voices. Authors such as Coward and Graham often relate to urbicide as a general feature of post-Cold War conflictivity – a novel form of intra-state warfare characterised by the growing urbanisation of its methods, battlefields and target populations. Instead, as Sara Fregonese (2019, p. 22) pertinently shows, urbicidal violence should be approached as the 'product of historically specific and contextually charged political

struggles'. Following a similar critique, Kipfer and Goonewardena (2007, p. 23) argue for an approach to urbicide that moves beyond transhistorical references to heterogeneity, the unpredictability of urban life or multiculturalism, understanding it instead as a 'particular set of strategies of destroying specific social and physical aspects of urban settlements [as well as] conditions of resistance and independence'.

Hence, while postcolonial scholarship has often been criticised for its excessive concern with discourse, cultural analysis and textuality and its lack of significant attention to materiality and situated material practices, 'the contemporary reality of urbicide' (Goonewardena & Kipfer, 2006, pp. 23–33) should allow for a rethinking of how colonial socio-material relations of power are central in the violent making and unmaking of cities. Instead of considering postcolonial theory as unfit to grasp the violent materialities of urbicide and their effects upon political subjectivity, I would argue precisely the contrary – that the relational sociomateriality of space and how it shapes the political must be at the centre of the postcolonial project. Instead of undoing decades of nuanced discursive work and analysis of colonial spatial regimes of representation and knowledge, working with and through postcolonial theory to reinforce its critical, material-spatial edge would appear to be more productive.

## 2. A postcolonial approach to the politics of urbicide

I argue that urbicide is not just about the destruction of urban spaces; it is also about shaping who belongs in a city, and who can access politics in the postcolonial world. In this regard, we need to pay attention to how the violent alteration of urban spaces disrupts the 'relationships between people and things' in the city, as Fregonese (2019, p. 124) suggests.

A postcolonial approach to the politics of urbicide highlights the mutually constitutive relationship between the realm of meaning and material practices, implicated in the articulation of colonial rationalities of power (past and present) and their incorporation into the everyday constitution of political subjects and their navigation, negotiation and contestation of ruptured spatialities. Such an understanding focuses on postcolonial conceptions of power and subject formation by exploring how the 'the strange continuity' of colonial relations, in Ann Laura Stoler's (2016, p. 345) terms, 'yields new damages and renewed disparities'. The most pressing task is thus to 'delineate the specific ways in which peoples and places are laid to waste, around whose lives debris accumulates, where it falls, and what constitutes "the rot that remains"'(ibid., p. 378).

In postcolonial societies, authorities often fear what they cannot see, control or classify – whether that means informal economies, irregular housing, or alternative ways of living outside formal state structures. This (postcolonial) anxiety towards the invisible is driven by a desire to produce order and obedient subjects. It materialises in the division of space through legal and security measures, in the normative and aesthetic representations of places and their built environments, and in the erasure of diverse forms of life by creating rigid, antagonistic urban spaces.

It is precisely in the postcolonial city, with its embeddedness in colonial legacies and modes of spatial rule, uneven economic development, and the unfulfilled promise of independence by postcolonial state-making, where the tensions and contradictions of modernity and subject formation appear the most vividly. Sectarian, ethnic or racialised understandings of civilisation are often internalised in postcolonial state-building and guide urban development and modernisation processes. State power is then directed at the violent reconfiguration and erasure of urban spaces, attempting to destroy resistant populations, produce everyday violent geographies of security, and clear new space 'for the most profitable bubbles of real estate speculation' (Graham, 2012, p. 147).

Indeed, from a postcolonial perspective urban destruction and violence should not be conceptualised as opposed to modern urbanity, but rather as integral to both peace and war. Crucially, the modernising developmental impulse of the postcolonial state, expressed through overtly violent or discriminatory urban planning involving mass demolitions, processes of reconstruction-through-erasure and practices of dispossession, would be encompassed within this understanding of urbicide. Urban planning and development are critical strategies within such a modernist and developmental rationale, particularly if we pay attention to urban peripheries, slums and informal neighbourhoods. In these urban geographies the failed aspirations of the postcolonial state and its colonial discourse, aesthetics and materiality emerge more substantially as state power seeks to hide, make invisible or simply erase those in the margins (LeVine, 2017, pp. 192–224).

## 2.1 Urbicide and the subject of politics

At the core of urbicide in the postcolonial world, we find necropolitics – the violent shaping of a subject's differential access to politics through the subjugation of life to the power of death

(Mbembe, 2019, p. 62). In this understanding, urbicide appears as one of the most extreme instantiations of sovereign violence, which renders the space of the city the terrain of a whole range of interventions – siege, the production of ruined geographies and vulnerable peoples, the violent reconfiguration of space, the obliteration of senses of place and socio-spatial identity – all aimed at the production of spatial zones of erasure.

Credits: Garroum Pla – Aleppo, Syria, Aug. 2018

Neighborhood of Aleppo's citadel. While some of the markets and most touristic zones have been preliminarily reconstructed during the last years, others have been abandoned, which exemplifies a coherent lack of politics of reconstruction under al-Assad and the use of ruins as practice of political punishment.

Crucially, however, and following postcolonial reworkings of Foucault, urbicidal violence reveals the interplay of both biopolitical and necropolitical logics of governmentality in contemporary operations of sovereign power in the postcolonial world. Rather than seeing them as mutually exclusive – a critique often waged against traditional Foucauldian understandings of power – a detailed exploration of urbicidal violence demonstrates how 'sovereign power and governmental power articulate, interconnect and merge at certain junctures and in particular spaces' (Ismail, 2018, p. 8). On the one hand, urbicide manifests in the form of the reconfiguration of urban spaces and their populations through the management of mobilities, forced degradation, housing development and planning, infrastructural provision, or reconstruction schemes. On the other hand, and particularly in contexts where sovereignty has been powerfully questioned or subsumed into a state of war, such forms of biopolitical power through violent spatial reordering not only extend into wartime but are also supplemented with necropolitical power. In such instances urbicide is not about violent spatial reorganisation aimed at ensuring order, mapping and securitising populations; instead, it is about the erasure of certain urban spatialities, their everyday lived materialities and populations.

Moreover, closer engagement with the work of the Cameroonian historian and political theorist Achille Mbembe can further clarify the role of state power in the politics of urbicide, and demonstrate why a postcolonial approach helps us to elucidate its dynamics and registers regarding political subjectivities. Building upon the work of Giorgio Agamben and his understanding of the state of exception, Mbembe shows that a focus on necropolitical power elucidates how entire populations may be rendered expendable and denied access to politics through the creation of 'death worlds' (Mbembe, 2003, p. 40) where the spatialisation of colonial power relations materialises a politics of enmity. For Mbembe, as noted earlier, biopolitical and necropolitical modes of power overlap and reinforce one another in today's sovereign operations that determine who should live and who must die within the body politic. Most obviously in postcolonial contexts, the state actively shapes spatial configurations and demographic compositions, promoting preferred forms of spatiality and annihilating perceived enemies and their lived spaces. In such necropolitical operations of power, underpinned by the articulation of enmity relations, urbicide emerges as the tangible, urban, lived manifestations of necropolitical logics.

When viewed through the lens of concrete sites such as Gaza or Aleppo, power appears both biopolitical and necropolitical; technologies of control, the shaping and design of space, and the management of population operate simultaneously with sovereign violence that is metonymically directed at bodies, landscapes, and lived geographies and seeks to erase what is perceived to endanger the body politic (the 'repressed topographies of cruelty', in Mbembe's (2019, p. 92) terms). Hence, urbicide, with its multiple rhythms, logics and intensities, ties together the destruction and violent alteration of both place and subject, understood as co-constituting each other.

However, the question of political agency under urbicide demands further attention and research. Although necropolitical power logics materialise in spatial modes of control, domination and erasure, space always 'escapes in part from those who would make use of it', as noted by Henri Lefebvre (1991, p. 26). In other words, as Bruce Stanley (2017, pp. 10–24) shows, citizens still retain agency and find gaps and everyday mechanisms to subvert, resist and reclaim politics in the face of the totalising urbicidal assemblage. Mbembe's analysis seems ambivalent about the very possibility of political agency under the all-encompassing violence of the postcolonial state, but nevertheless he also recognised in an interview that this violence 'no longer appears as mechanical and unilateral domination forcing the subjugated into silence and inaction [since] the colonized person is a living, talking, conscious, active individual whose identity arises from a three-pronged movement of violation, erasure and self-rewriting' (Eurozine, 2008, p. 6). I suggest that the postcolonial critique of urbicide should be precisely directed at finding and politicising the gap within the impossibility of full antagonism inscribed upon space. As Salwa Ismail (2018, p. 8) reminds us, political violence is also governmental; it is never outside the realm of politics, and is thus 'formative of terrains of subjectivation and political action'. Thus, any analysis of the place of governmentality, necropolitics and bare life must account for the exploration of multiple forms of political agency and resistance.

## 3. Conclusion

The postcolonial critique suggests an understanding of urbicide as a phenomenon with specific historical conditions of emergence, which directs attention towards the discourses and practices that make the operation of colonial rationales behind practices of urban destruction in late modern forms of warfare both possible and meaningful.

When exploring armed conflicts in the Global South, the centrality of dispossession, injury, ruination and colonial power relations becomes apparent. By explicitly unpacking urbicidal violence through a postcolonial lens, we can foreground how the government and regulation of the subject's access to politics should remain at the centre of our enquiries. Despite criticism, the postcolonial critique remains powerful in its ability to address the contemporary realities of war and violence, particularly if we are able to foreground a political sensibility for everyday materialities and situated practices (Garroum Pla, 2025).

Currently, in various degrees, contexts and histories, the lives of many in the postcolonial world continue to be violently governed and subjected to the power of death as dehumanising discourses proliferate, and international intervention remains crucial in enforcing and protecting the exercise of authoritarian modes of power in the name of security. However, as Christine Sylvester (2013, p. 126) puts it, 'space has its limits, but the study of war that features flesh and blood … and performing bodies, emotions, and social relations is expanding'. Perhaps we must insist on the need to think transnationally about the experience of urbicide in order to keep thinking about the global through the specific, and to problematise how colonial relations circulate and disrupt global solidarities. Even more importantly, however, we must also remind ourselves that the promise of the new, despite ruination and a permanent state of security/war, remains a space of possibility.

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