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**Beyond the Republic of Fear:
Symbolic Domination in Ba'athist Iraq**

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Abstract

This paper explores the significance of official rhetoric, symbolism and cultural production as a social practice of domination in Ba'athist Iraq. In order to make sense of this aspect of domination, it is necessary to go beyond the level of regime imagery and look at the ways in which systems of signification were upheld and, at times, subverted by different parts of the population. The shortage of studies dealing with this question regarding Ba'athist Iraq must be seen in conjuncture with the main theoretical concepts employed so far, 'traditional legitimacy' and 'totalitarianism'. By merely considering the content of official representation and speculating about its persuasiveness, both have precluded rather than invited closer examination of people's everyday lives and the ways in which they related to the representation of authority. The notion of Ba'athist Iraq as a totalitarian 'republic of fear' in particular has reduced domination to the spread of violence and fear and assumed its total grip on the population's minds. This paper will examine practices like mass displays of allegiance, the reiteration of official language or representations of violence as ambivalent forms of domination which invited a variety of responses from a diverse population. It argues for a new theoretical approach, which must be able to conceive the power of authoritarian states to shape ideas and bodies through symbolic-disciplinary practices as well as the possibility of subversion. Such practices sought to implicate Iraqis in the exertion of dictatorial domination without necessarily making them believe in the claims of the regime.

Keywords

Iraq, Baath, domination, symbol, representation

Introduction*

This paper explores the significance of official rhetoric, symbolism and cultural production as a social practice of domination in Ba'athist Iraq. This regime produced and promoted a peculiar political language and imagery, which dominated and guided public expression of any kind. Judging from phenomena such as the near omnipresence of Saddam Hussein's picture in public spaces, shops, buildings, and even private homes all over Iraq, as well as from the fact that during the March 1991 uprisings in various parts of the country, these constituted one of the first targets of the crowds' anger (cp. Jabar 1994:106), the representation of power seems to have been important for upholding the Ba'ath rule. By looking at this aspect more closely, the paper explores the relevance of the symbolic as a form of domination and control as well as its limits in one of the most authoritarian regimes of the MENA region.

'Symbolic domination' in this paper is used as a generic term encompassing multiple forms of state-sponsored¹ policies and practices beyond direct physical coercion and the distribution of resources, which impinge upon the way people conceive of themselves and behave in the social and political world.² The employment of this term is based on the assumption that the realm of symbols and rhetoric is an essential part of exercising political authority, which is to some extent independent and still linked to other aspects of domination, not least that of physical coercion. The term also indicates that compliance is not necessarily based on belief, but can follow other logics.

I will argue that in order to assess the relevance of symbolic forms of domination, it is necessary to go beyond a narrow focus on the state and on the content of state-sponsored symbolic production, and to look at the *effects* of symbols of domination on the minds and the behaviour of the dominated, i.e. at 'the ways in which systems of signification are consumed, upheld, contested, and subverted' (Wedeen 1999:18). Only then is it possible to go beyond the rather simplistic notion of Ba'athist Iraq as a 'republic of fear'. The question of effects of symbolic domination has, however, not been sufficiently dealt with so far. This is partly due to a severe shortage of empirical studies about everyday life under the Ba'ath, but in equal measure to a lack of adequate theoretical conceptualisation of this aspect of domination.³ If it has been addressed, it has for the most part been connected to the problematic concepts of 'totalitarianism' and 'traditional legitimacy'. As I will argue, both have prevented a more deep going analysis. The aim of this paper is to lay the ground for an alternative approach. Thus, it is

* A previous version of this paper was presented in Workshop 2 'Policing and Incarceration in the Middle East and North Africa: Theoretical and Empirical Investigations' at the Eighth Mediterranean Social and Political Research Meeting, Florence & Montecatini Terme, 21–25 March 2007, organised by the Mediterranean Programme of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute.

1 The term 'state-sponsored' is borrowed from Davis (2005). It indicates, on the one hand, that sites of symbolic production are formally or informally tied to the state, which thus has a crucial impact on contents and forms. On the other hand, it implies that symbolic production should not be viewed as unitary and as equivalent with the state or regime, as even in authoritarian systems in which public expression is highly regulated, symbolic production always leaves space for ambiguity and *double entendre*.

2 The term 'symbolic' is generally preferred to 'cultural' in this paper. Although anthropology and sociology have generally abandoned the view of culture as a integrated and often nationally bounded whole, and have adopted new standard definitions such as plural and internally divided 'systems of meaning and the practices in which they are embedded' (Steinmetz 1999:6-7), the above mentioned simplistic views of culture can still be frequently found in political science accounts of non-Western polities. If 'culture' is used in this paper, it should be understood in the latter, broader way.

3 This lack partly results from boundaries between social science disciplines, particularly between political science on the one hand and sociology and anthropology on the other. It is rare to find 'political ethnographies of power' (Wedeen 1999:25) which combine the analysis of the representation of state authority with a deeper inquiry into what people think and do in relation to it in different contexts and socio-cultural settings (Exceptions regarding the Middle East include Wedeen 1999 from a political science perspective or, from the perspective of anthropology, Abu-Lughod 1998).

not an empirical paper, but a theoretical investigation based on and evaluating existing literature concerning the period of Ba^cth rule in Iraq.

I will start by briefly introducing four concepts which have addressed the effects of symbolic domination in the Arab world—legitimacy, hegemony, governmentality / 'politics as if' and, with a particular view to Iraq, totalitarianism.⁴ In the second and main part, I will analyse the extent to which existing studies on symbolic forms of domination in Ba^cthist Iraq have reflected these theoretical approaches. After assessing the relevance of symbolic policies and practices for the Ba^cth regime as well as for the population at large and noting trends and changes in their contents over time, I will focus on the concepts these studies have worked with regarding the reception of official rhetoric and symbolism and point out their strengths and shortcomings. It will show that empirical and theoretical shortcomings are intimately connected, as the theoretical tools that have mostly been used tend to preclude a more thorough analysis of the effects of state rhetoric among different sectors of the population. After providing pieces of evidence from Iraq which point into other directions, the third part will indicate the most promising conceptual tools for future empirical research on the effects of rhetoric and symbolism. I will suggest that the concept of 'politics as if' as well as the Gramscian notions of 'hegemony' and 'common sense' could be particularly useful in this regard. Concluding, I will point out the issues which any approach to symbolic forms of domination should be able to conceive.

Concepts of Symbolic Domination in the Study of the Arab State

One feature of authoritarian regimes, among which Ba^cthist Iraq should be counted, is their attempt to control not only the political and economic but also the symbolic sphere and thereby enhance their hold over social and political life (cp. Owen 2000:27-44). In order to come to terms with the significance of this effort, a concept that can adequately address symbolic forms of domination is needed. In the main debates about the state in recent Anglo-American political science between 'state-centred' (neo-Weberian) and 'society-centred' (neo-Marxist) approaches about the degree of autonomy of the state from social forces, the attention given to symbolic forms of rule has only been marginal (Steinmetz 1999:4, Mitchell 1991:2-3). However, there are some concepts in political science that have paid more attention to such forms and their reception and have been applied to Middle East politics.

(Neo-)Weberian Approaches: Traditional Legitimacy and Political Culture

If debates about the state in the Middle East have considered symbolic forms of domination in more depth, it has mostly been through the lens of the Weberian concept of legitimacy, indicating the belief in the appropriateness of a particular form of rule (cf. Weber 1978). In the study of Middle Eastern politics, legitimacy has often been used as a general synonym for support, identification or loyalty to particular regimes and their policies, which has not particularly focused on culture, symbols, rhetoric etc. Regarding the latter, however, a second interpretation, building on Weber's notion of 'traditional authority' based on an 'established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of those exercising authority under them' (Weber 1978:215) has been rather prominent. The assumption guiding such an understanding of legitimacy is that neither Middle Eastern regimes nor societies can adequately be analysed with the concept of 'legal-rational' authority and legitimacy, and

4 A number of new conceptualisations of the relation between politics and culture have emerged in the wake of the cultural turn (for an overview, see Steinmetz 1999, Berezin 1997). They have, however, not produced a coherent approach regarding the question of 'effects' or 'reception' of symbolic displays of power.

that power structures based on personal and informal arrangements—often termed '(neo-) patrimonialism'—are in some way linked to 'traditional culture'.⁵

Such a line of reasoning has been reinforced by the 'political culture approach', which has suggested that attitudes and values rooted in Middle Eastern society through its Islamic and Arab heritage—such as submissiveness to authority, a lack of initiative, patriarchal attitudes, suspicion toward outsiders, and others—can explain political realities in the region, be it internal strife among political elites or the persistence of clientelism (cp. Ben-Dor 1977, Berezin 1997:363-8, Steinmetz 1999:19-20). Whereas the theoretical concept was abandoned by and large during the 1980s, it has continued to inform writing on Arab politics, especially on the social bases of (neo-)patrimonialism or authoritarianism (e.g. Sharabi 1988, regarding Ba'athist Iraq, Heine 1993). For a considerable number of Middle Eastern analysts, different regimes' employment of symbols appealing to 'tradition' or religion (pan-Arabism, tribalism, Islam, etc.) is accordingly seen as corresponding to an overall outlook of the respective societies and as essential for eliciting consent to their rule (Crystal 1994:277).

As the concept of legitimacy indicates the coincidence of a type of regime with the belief in its appropriateness by the ruled (Weber 1978:212-4), it does link up to other aspects of domination. However, legitimacy is explicitly conceptualised as a voluntary form of compliance which makes domination more stable than pure coercion or material interest. Thus, there is no reference to the symbolic as a form of coercion or control.

(Neo-)Gramscian Approaches: Hegemony

Another way to assess the symbolic dimension of state strength is with the notion of hegemony.⁶ The term in its contemporary usage was coined by Antonio Gramsci, who contrasted it to direct domination or command through formal state structures (1971:12). Although Gramsci has not given a coherent definition of hegemony, most authors who use the term agree on several important points: Firstly, hegemony has to do with the diffusion of a world-view into everyday life, so that the 'general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group' (ibid.) is perceived as natural and taken-for-granted and that there is active or passive consent to it. Secondly, hegemony goes beyond state rhetoric—a ruling group's hegemony in the symbolic sphere is based on its economic and political leadership. Hegemony can therefore never purely arise in the 'cultural' sphere, but stems from the capacity to integrate broader sectors of the population in socio-economic and political terms as well (e.g. Ayubi 1995:32-3). Thirdly, hegemony goes beyond formal state institutions. It is particularly institutions of 'civil society'—schools, parties, the press, religious institutions, etc.—in and through which consent is created and maintained (Gramsci 1971:7, 15-7, 245, 267). Still, hegemony is not thought of as a stable state of affairs uniformly accepted by all, but as a continuous struggle between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces over different interests and world-views (cp. Davis 2005:21).

Gramsci's conception of the 'integral state' (which includes 'intermediary' institutions) as 'hegemony protected by the armour of coercion' (Gramsci 1971:263) points to an intimate linkage between symbolic and coercive aspects of domination. Modern integral states not only possess the means to promote particular understandings of the past and present of a collective, but also the legally sanctioned means to use violence to punish those who disagree (Davis 2005:5). Yet also regarding the

5 This goes back to Weber's connection of the type of claims which are made by rulers with a particular 'mode of exercising authority', a 'type of obedience', and a particular 'administrative staff developed to guarantee it' (Weber 1978:213). Due to this logic, 'patrimonialism' appears as one of the forms in which 'traditional authority' is exercised.

6 Due to its limited relevance in writings on Ba'athist Iraq, the concept of 'ideology' will not be tackled here. The title of A. Baram's study on *Culture, History and Ideology in the Formation of Ba'athist Iraq, 1968-89* (Baram 1991) is misleading in this regard, as it does not put forward a clear and definitively not a materialist conception of ideology.

'soft' strategies of persuasion, the integral state is not merely an actor putting forward notions that are accepted or defied—as in the notion of legitimacy—but it assumes the role of an educator (Gramsci 1971:258-9). This draws attention to the fact that symbols or 'ideas' are inscribed in and disseminated through institutions and practices, which can be regarded as a form of coercion or disciplining as well.

Foucaultian Approaches: Disciplining, Governmentality and 'Politics As If'

The most direct linkage between symbolic practices, coercion and control is made in approaches based on the reasoning of Michel Foucault. In Foucaultian thinking, it is not so much the content of state-sponsored symbolic production which makes it effective, but rather underlying techniques of government such as the systematisation of control, organisation of time, space and movement, hierarchisation, etc. Such techniques or disciplines express themselves in particular social processes and practices, such as rituals in schools, armies, factories, churches, prisons, etc. Participation in such practices creates new forms of subjectivity, i.e. ways in which social actors perceive of themselves and regulate and control their own behaviour. This 'disciplining of the self', in turn, forms the basis on which a belief in legitimacy or other forms of compliance can subsequently emerge (cp. Mitchell 1991:92-3; Lemke 2002b:468). Foucault's concept of 'governmentality' in particular has drawn attention to the intimate connection between technologies of domination and 'technologies of the self' (cp. Foucault 1991, Lemke 2002a, b). This is a useful approach for the question of symbolic forms of domination and their effects on the minds and behaviour of the ruled. It should be noted, however, that the focus of Foucault and most authors working with the paradigm of governmentality is on Western (neo-)liberal regimes, where technologies of the self have come to substitute for direct forms of control and repression to a significant extent. Thus, it needs to be adapted to the differing contexts prevailing in many states of the MENA region.

A variation, which has been applied to authoritarian regimes in the Arab world, specifically Syria under Hafez al-Assad, might be termed 'politics as if' (Wedeen 1999:6). It looks at the disciplinary role of language, imagery and practices in political contexts 'where patently spurious claims are vigorously enforced' (1998:511). Wedeen states that practices like the reiteration of official slogans and the participation in public spectacles revering the president are not based on citizens' shared belief in the truth of official claims, but on public dissimulation of allegiance. Enforced dissimulation, however, is still effective as a mechanism of social control. The obligation, for example, to participate in symbolic displays of power of the regime or the leader disciplines participants and encourages self-discipline by organising space, movement and language. Participation also creates an atmosphere of complicity, making ordinary citizens aware that they uphold the system of domination by complying and thereby depoliticising them. In addition to that, symbolic forms of domination serve to anchor certain political ideas in the imagination of the population. They clutter public space with guidelines and formulas for accepted political expression and conduct and thereby prevent the formation and elaboration of other political ideas. In this approach, forms of transgression or contestation of a regime's power are still structured by state-sponsored rhetorical and symbolic guidelines (1999:1-49).

Totalitarianism and the Destruction of Independent Thinking

Another concept which addresses the role of ideas and symbols in exercising authority is 'totalitarianism'.⁷ In most classical conceptions, a totalitarian system is characterised as a dictatorship in which all aspects of social life are pervaded and politicised by the political leadership, mostly via a single political party and connected mass organisations and an extensive security or terror apparatus working in the name of a totalitarian ideology (e.g. Arendt 1976, Friedrich / Breznezinski 1965).

⁷ As it is not a 'meta-approach' of how to analyse (symbolic) domination, but a concept for a specific form of government, it does not range on the same analytic level as the three approaches introduced before. However, it is included due to its prominence in studies about Ba'athist Iraq as well as its relevance for the topic of this workshop.

The basic assumption of the totalitarianism framework regarding the 'reception' of ideas and symbols is that terror and mass organisation lead to the destruction of all social, legal and political traditions and thus to a total exposure of people to the ideology of the ruling regime. Society is thus destroyed and re-created as a dependent appendix of the political system (cf. Jessen 1995, Arendt 1976). Resembling the Foucaultian approach, it is not so much the specific content of ideas but the form in which they are put in practice, i.e. violence, control and mass organisation, which makes them effective. In contrast to a model such as 'politics as if', in which everyday forms of transgression—resulting from shared unbelief—are common, the consequence of the 'reign of fear' is that people become willing to believe in anything, that all independent thinking ceases and 'politics ends' (e.g. Arendt, cit. in Makiya 2004:10).

In its classical form, the concept was developed as an ideal-type to compare the German National Socialist regime as well as the Soviet Union and its satellite states in the cold war era. This indicates that it simultaneously served as a scientific and a normative-political concept aiming to demonise particular regimes. This is also the case for Ba'athist Iraq—the only regime in the MENA region to which it has been applied.

The four concepts just presented have been drawn on to a different extent in the study of Middle East politics. The notion of legitimacy based on 'traditional culture' can still be regarded as the most common way of conceptualising symbolic forms of domination. Regarding Ba'athist Iraq, the concept of totalitarianism has also become particularly wide-spread. Two more open-ended conceptions, 'hegemony' and 'politics as if', have started to be employed more recently (e.g. Alnasseri 2004, Ayubi 1995, Davis / Gavrielides 1991, Wedeen 1999) and can provide interesting alternatives. With regard to Ba'athist Iraq, however, this kind of reasoning is still in its infancy.

Symbolic Domination in Ba'athist Iraq

In relation to the overall amount of academic literature on Ba'athist Iraq, there are not many studies that consider symbolic forms of domination in more depth. Most prominent accounts of the political system under the Ba'ath have concentrated on the 'material' aspects of this regime, i.e. on the composition of the ruling elite, its sources of revenues, the distribution of resources through informal and formal power mechanisms, and forms and methods of direct control and punishment. However, the public uncovering of conspiracies and the holding of show trials in the early years of Ba'ath rule have been frequently noticed. The personality cult that surrounded Saddam Hussein as well as the emergence of an Iraqi (vs. Arab) nationalism and the promotion of a myth of common origin of all Iraqis in ancient Mesopotamia are also repeatedly mentioned in accounts of the history of Iraq (e.g. Tripp 2002:225-6; Farouk-Sluglett / Sluglett 1991a: 271-3, Marr 2004:169-70, 209-11). Apart from that, however, not much attention has been paid to the regime's attempts to control the symbolic sphere.

Nevertheless, the Ba'ath regime spent considerable efforts and a substantial part of its revenues on the promotion of certain types of political language and cultural expression: One need only think about the encompassing 'project for the rewriting of history' (*mashru' i'adat kitabat at-tarikh*) set up after 1973, the sums invested in the construction of museums, monuments and archaeological sites reflecting the regime's endeavour to promote the identification of Iraqis with ancient Mesopotamia, with their 'leader-president' or against their Iranian enemy, or about the immense budget of a film devoted to the historical battle of *al-Qadisiyya*⁸—reportedly the most expensive Arab film ever produced (cp. Davis 2005:148-75, 196-7). Another indicator for the importance of symbolic forms of domination is the emphasis in many of Saddam Hussein's speeches as well as in the reports of the Ba'ath party congresses on 'information and culture', which were deemed essential areas for the Ba'ath to engage in, in order to shape a 'new man' and a new kind of collective identity, which were

8 This historical battle, 'which became a symbol of Muslims prevailing over infidels and of Arabs defeating Persians, took place in 636 or 637 [A.C.], south of the city of Najaf' (Bengio 1998:173).

supposed to lead the Ba^cthist ‘revolution’ to success (cp. MOI 1979:109-20, ABSP 1983:154-53). Its relevance is also reflected in the measures set in place to control the public sphere, e.g. the establishment of a daily press which was either state-owned, headed by close personal allies of Saddam Hussein or financially dependent on the government, while at the same time prohibiting all non-Ba^cthist public expression.⁹ Finally, the widely publicised efforts to delegitimise, try or eliminate (real or fictional) opponents of the regime also point to the relevance of the representation of authority.

The significance of state-sponsored symbolism and cultural production goes beyond the intention of regime members. From what is known through personal accounts of everyday life under the Ba^cth, one can assume that symbolic instances of domination constituted a relevant part of the lives of many Iraqis and shaped their perceptions of politics. This particularly applies to phenomena like the personality cult established around Saddam Hussein: there was hardly any public place in post-1979 Iraq where you would not find a picture or statue of him, and a considerable number of (urban) Iraqis became involved in political ‘spectacles’ like public trials and hangings of alleged conspirators, commemorations of occasions such as the birthday of the party or the President, public oaths of allegiance to Saddam Hussein, etc., for which schoolchildren, university students and others would be assembled, or the mobilisation for militias like the ‘al-Quds liberation army’ (Kubba 2003:6-7, Bengio 1998:74-7, Baran 2004: 70-86).

Regarding scholarly analysis, some areas of symbolic and cultural production have been well documented, while others have not yet enjoyed closer attention: The violent spectacles of the early years of Ba^cth rule and their effects have been explored to a certain degree (esp. al-Khalil 1991). Other forms of mass participation have also been documented, though not in a more encompassing way (e.g. Baran 2004, Darle 2003). An area that has been investigated quite thoroughly, in contrast, is that of the state press, which constituted an important form of promoting the regime’s ideas of authority and prescribing a certain type of language for public political conversation (Bengio 1998). Another sector that has been well-explored is that of museums and archaeology, festivals and journals promoting popular folklore as well as identification with pre-Islamic Mesopotamia (Baram 1991, Davis 1994, Davis 2005). The construction of monuments ostensibly commemorating the Iran-Iraq War during the 1980s has also been highlighted as a sphere in which the regime’s ideas about power and authority were expressed (Makiya 2004). In contrast to this, there has not been an empirical study on the role of state TV, and except for some general remarks (e.g. in al-Khalil 1991:76-88), the role of schools and youth organisations in promoting certain notions of politics in Iraq has not been subject to closer scientific examination.

Trends and Changes Over Time

The contents of official rhetoric and symbolism changed considerably in the course of the 35 years of Ba^cth rule¹⁰ in Iraq. These changes relate to different phases of the regime, particularly concerning its social base as well as its degree of control of different parts of the population. In retrospect, one could roughly divide the period of Ba^cth rule in Iraq into three such phases: In the first phase, from the initial *coup d’état* in 1968 to 1979, the Ba^cth sought to incorporate a wider constituency and pursued what could be termed ‘authoritarian populist’ policies, i.e. the simultaneous expansion of the party, the mass organisations and the surveillance apparatus, coupled with welfarist policies (cp. Hinnebusch 1990:1-18). This was particularly made possible by the massive influx of revenues due to the nationalisation of oil production in 1972, which enabled the Ba^cth to buy off potential opponents while at the same

9 From 1969, the regime created a press monopoly for the Ba^cthist dailies (Bengio 1998:8) - with the exception of the communist press, which was banned only in 1979 (Mohsen 1994:10), and the Kurdish press, which was allowed to publish independently between 1970-1974 (Bengio 1998:116).

10 The short (nine month) period of Ba^cth rule in 1963 is not considered as part of the Ba^cth regime here, as the party had a different leadership and membership at that time, and so many internal changes took place until the 1968 coup that it would be misleading to suppose a continuity by more than name.

time fighting those who would not comply. From 1973-78, it maintained a 'National Progressive Front' with the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP), and started negotiations with Kurdish oppositional groups. At the same time, opponents inside and outside the ruling elite were persecuted, tried or eliminated by the increasingly omnipresent secret services (e.g. Farouk-Sluglett / Sluglett 1991a:184-98).

The second phase, roughly covering 1979-1991, was dominated by the war with Iran which from 1982 turned into the defensive, so that many fights took place on Iraqi territory. Due to the war expenses, state resources dwindled, and there was less to distribute. Populist policies of the past (e.g. concerning land reform) were revised or abandoned, measures of economic liberalisation and privatisation were put in place, and the period witnessed immense enrichment of many members of the ruling elite. This reversal of policies was also linked to a change of external alliances and a rapprochement with 'the West'. In terms of composition of the core elite, the 'Takriti Ba'ath' (Davis 2005:3) turned into a regime predominated by Saddam Hussein's clan and a circle of trusted men. The party and security apparatus was still crucial as organ of control, but the period witnessed an increasing focus on the person of Saddam Hussein as a distributor of rewards as well as in symbolic terms. Apart from a brief period of opening in the late 1980s, no independent expression of opinions was possible any more (cp. Davis 2005:176-89).

The third phase covers the period from the Gulf war and the 1991 *intifada* up until the end of Saddam Hussein's rule. It was characterised by a diminishing degree of state control over the population in parts of the country, by Kurdish autonomy in the North, and by the international sanctions regime, which resulted in economic hardship for the population at large. In order to maintain order particularly in rural areas, the regime increasingly relied on tribal groups, and this cooperation provided a new informal mechanism of distribution and inclusion (e.g. Marr 2004:291-302, Tripp 2002:265-75).

In correspondence with those broad phases, the contents of regime imagery changed as well: From the first to the second phase outlined above, one can firstly observe a shift in regime discourse from a secular Ba'athist rhetoric stressing pan-Arabism, modernism, a vaguely defined socialism, strong anti-Zionism and anti-Imperialism, to one in which religious rhetoric and imagery were prominent. The Islamisation of official rhetoric and symbolism became especially pronounced after the Islamic revolution in Iran and during the first and second Gulf Wars (Bengio 1998:176). One of its culminations was the *Qadisiyyat Saddam* campaign, which was the name officially given to the Iran-Iraq War by the Iraqi regime and media. By linking this war with the historical battle of *Qadisiyya*, it sought to evoke the image of a nation of Muslim Arabs fighting Persian 'infidels'. The symbolic turn to Islam was also reflected in the idiom and public conduct of Hussein, who increasingly sought to portray himself as a pious Muslim ruler, e.g. by making the pilgrimage to Mecca (in 1981), as well as by habitually beginning his speeches with the term '*basmala*' [in the name of God] and ending them with '*Allahu akbar*' [God is Great] (Bengio 1998:182-3). The regime also sought to fashion an image of the president as protector of the Shi'a, spending considerable amounts of money on the reconstruction of the shrines in Najaf and Karbala and visiting Shi'i holy places (ibid.:179). In 1990, the scripture '*Allahu akbar*' was added to the Iraqi flag as a confirmation of this trend (Davis 2005:182). In architecture as well, an increasing emphasis on Islamic symbols can be observed, e.g. in the martyrs' monument, a split dome commemorating the dead in the Iran-Iraq war (cf. Makiya 2004:23-6).

A second marked trend is the increasing emphasis in regime discourse and imagery on the leadership figure of Saddam Hussein. Starting even before the ascent of Hussein to the presidency in 1979, it developed into a veritable personality cult which was present in almost all domains of cultural production since the 1980s—from a novel about Hussein's involvement in the assassination attempt on the then Iraqi President Qasem, which was turned into a comic strip as well as a film (cp. Douglas / Malti-Douglas 1994) over his adulation in the war imagery and the terming of the Iran-Iraq war as *Qadisiyyat Saddam* to the efforts at re-building Babylon, where each stone had the President's name

engraved in it, up to the construction of the 'victory arch' in Baghdad, a sculpture consisting of two giant arms holding a sword, which were reportedly cast from the model of Saddam's arms (Makiya 2004). His features assumed near omnipresence in public spaces—it could be found on shop windows, entrances to homes, billboards, statues, stamps, and even watches (see *ibid.* for graphic displays). In some periods, almost half of the space of the daily papers was filled with pictures, drawings, speeches or one-liners of the President, turning 'his personal idiom into the common speech of many of the Iraqis [...] exposed to it' (Bengio 1998:8, 78). Overall, the focus on the person seems to have assumed greater prominence than the promotion of other areas of cultural production (Davis 2005:189).

A third area of changes was that of Arabism and Iraqi nationalism and the question of who to include in the national collective in which form. On the one hand, the years after 1970 witnessed an increasing emphasis on 'Iraqiness', i.e. on a - secular - Iraqi identity separate from the Arab one. This was manifested in the promotion of Iraq's Mesopotamian heritage through journals, archaeological excavations and folkloric activities, as well as in the 'introduction of ceremonies, names, and symbols, dating back to Islamic, but also pre-Islamic Mesopotamia, into the administrative, political and cultural life of modern Iraq' (Baram 1991:25). The Iran-Iraq war and the *Qadisiyyat Saddam* campaign further increased this emphasis on a territorial national identity. On the other hand, Islam and Arabism also featured prominently in the cultural production accompanying the war campaign and continued to be relevant after 1991 (Davis 2005:188-93; Tripp 1993:106-11). In addition, the period since the late 1980s witnessed an increasing reference to tribal values and traditions, which had constituted a taboo subject up to then. Symbolic tribute to tribalism would range from widely publicised meetings of the president with tribal leaders swearing allegiance to him to the proclamation of the Ba'ath as the 'tribe of all tribes' (cf. Baram 1997, Jabar 2000).

Finally, there was a notable shift regarding the conception of the 'other' that Iraq had to guard itself from: In the 1970s, imperialism and Israel served as prime targets of hatred, conspiracy allegations, etc., whereas during the Iran-Iraq war the main antagonism in official rhetoric and symbolism was that of Arab Muslims vs. (Persian) 'infidels'. This dichotomy could be interpreted as promoting a sense of community, which could transcend the Sunni-Shi'i split. At the same time, however, the discourse of *shu'ubiyya* became more intense. This historically charged allegation of treason, which was primarily directed at Communists in the 1970s, was now rather geared at the 'Iranian influence/ element' outside as well as inside Iraq, and amounted to permanent suspicion against Iraqi Shi'is (cp. Davis 2005:184-88, Bengio 1998:103-6). In the years after the setup of the UN sanctions regime, anti-imperialism became more pronounced again.

Whereas these shifts in the content of regime rhetoric and symbolism can be discerned quite clearly, I will point out below that they should not necessarily be viewed as consistent, as they were characterised by considerable internal contradictions and ambiguities in practice.

Conceptualising the 'Reception' of Symbolic Forms of Domination

A number of studies dealing with aspects of symbolic domination in Ba'athist Iraq confine their analysis to the realm of the state, i.e. focus on official and semi-official documents and deliberately do not to engage in the question of the effects of specific symbolic policies (e.g. Baram 1991; Farouk-Sluglett / Sluglett 1991a:271-3; Tripp 1993:105-110). Such an analysis mostly pursues two goals - to document the manifestations of symbolic and cultural policies designed to influence upon different sectors of the populace and to identify the motivations of the initiators or the contexts in which certain policies were pursued.

This is important in order to explain the above-described changes of official rhetoric and imagery. Concerning the Islamisation of regime discourse, for example, the outbreak of violence in Najaf and Karbala in 1977 and the rise to prominence of the Da'wa party, but no less the perceived threat by the Iranian revolution and the regional development of Islam into a language of opposition should be regarded as an important context for this shift. The new symbolic policies can be interpreted as a move

to fill a discursive space, which could be occupied by oppositional voices (cp. Bengio 1998:15-6). Another thoroughly investigated change are the reasons why and context in which the Ba'ath started to actively promote the 'Mesopotamian heritage', e.g. in order to symbolically integrate leftist and intellectual circles which had embraced 'Iraqism' rather than pan-Arabism, in order to appease Kurdish and Shi'ite constituencies at a juncture where the regime failed to reach an agreement with the Kurds and where Shi'ites almost disappeared from the Ba'ath leadership, as well as in reaction to the decline of Pan-Arabism in the aftermath of the 1967 war (cp. Baram 1991:13-7). Still, these observations do not indicate what *effects* these policies had on the everyday lives of Iraqis and how they actually engaged with official rhetoric and symbolism.

Totalitarianism—Ba'athist Iraq as 'Republic of Fear'

Among the most prominent approaches addressing this question is the conception of Ba'athist Iraq as a totalitarian regime. This approach has become particularly prominent through the writings of Kanan Makiya (partly under the pseudonym of Samir al-Khalil), but has been adopted or received sympathetic reviews by other scholars (e.g. Bozarslan / Dawod 2001, Farouk-Sluglett / Sluglett 1991b, Kreutzer / Schmidinger 2004, Mohsen 1994). In this analysis, it was not so much the cultural content and resonance of particular symbols which served to elicit support for the regime but a pervasive fear which took over the country and served as the 'glue' holding the polity together.

In *Republic of Fear*, Makiya focuses on the effect of symbolic displays of violence and absolute authority. In his analysis a number of public trials, confessions and subsequent executions of alleged 'Zionist' or 'Persian' conspirators between 1968 and 1975, in which a mass of people were involved as spectators and participants—spurred on to demand the condemnation of the accused, follow the trial on television and publicly watch and cheer the executions—served to forge an initial bond of complicity between the regime and the populace at large. Gradually, however, mass participation was substituted by the inculcation of fear through the regime's expanding institutions of violence (al-Khalil 1991:46-72).

Following the totalitarianism concept, the analysis of Makiya and others is based on the assumption that by installing a regime of violence, expanding the party apparatus and at the same time prohibiting all other forms of political activity and public debate, the Ba'ath managed to crush or rather completely take over 'civil society' and with it, any instance of independent thinking or expression. The fear it instilled and the omnipresent suspicion of informants lead to extensive self-control and mutual policing regarding political expression in public and private. Through its emphasis on the education of the young and by tightening its grip on 'the masses', e.g. via its campaigns to erase illiteracy, the Ba'ath subsequently inscribed its ideology, a 'hermetically closed-off world' (Uwer/ von der Osten-Sacken 2004:60) into the minds of the population. As a result, the population whose previous social bonds were erased and from whom all other means of making sense of the social world were taken away, became willing to believe in anything (al-Khalil 1991:76-88, Uwer / von der Osten-Sacken 2004:55). Makiya maintains that even those Iraqis who initially only complied out of fear but did not believe in the regime's phoney claims and exaggerated symbolism, gradually adopted their 'masks' worn in public to an extent that they really started to believe (al-Khalil 1991:104-5).

In a later book, Makiya also looks at Ba'athist forms of 'invention of tradition' like the Mesopotamia myth. The regime's outward obsession with *turath* [heritage] does not have an independent 'cultural' relevance to him, as it is not linked in any way to the wishes of the population but purely stems from Saddam Hussein's mind. Thus, cultural production of the regime, such as the monuments erected in the course of the 1980s and early 1990s, primarily express the absolute authority of the regime (2004:124), the litmus test of which is the capability to 'turn lies into truth', e.g. to make Iraqis believe in Iraq's victory over Iran, in the president's descent from 'Ali, in Saddam's *Qadisiyya* or other phoney claims (Makiya 2004:17-8).

The problem with this account of symbolic politics in Iraq is that it assumes an automatic response of the population by way of derivation from the tenets of totalitarianism theory. While this kind of analysis deserves credit for drawing attention to the power of authoritarian regimes to shape thought and to enforce outward compliance through violence, control over symbolic production and socialising institutions, it neither explores reasons for compliance nor can it adequately conceptualise how change and opposition can arise.

It tends to reduce the regime's efforts to dominate the public sphere to a mere attempt to instil terror and fear. Ambivalent forms and mechanisms of compliance as well as the regime's efforts to win over particular social sectors, e.g. through anti-Zionist, anti-imperialist, religious or other stances or through its interpretation of the past encouraging an Iraqi nationalism (cp. Farouk-Sluglett / Sluglett 1991: 135, Davis 2005) are thus overlooked.

Moreover, the diversity of Iraq's population is not considered. According to Makiya, the regime of fear set up by the Ba'ath erased all differences between different social groups, be they based on kinship, sect, confession or class (al-Khalil 1991:88). This does not take into account that people's reactions might have varied according to their social background and political experiences, and according to the position they assumed in the regime's power structure. Analyses of other states termed totalitarian, such as the German NS regime or the GDR, have shown that while there certainly was a general pressure to outwardly comply to regime propaganda, actual attitudes and everyday responses varied a lot depending on specific milieus, geographical areas, cohorts or professional groups, their material situation and the availability and mobilisation of alternative sources of meaning (e.g. Peukert 1987, Bessel / Jessen 1996). Only a closer analysis of such social groups could give clues to forms of and reasons for compliance, transgression and resistance.

Last but not least, it should not be forgotten that totalitarianism is not just a highly problematic scientific concept but has a political dimension as well. In the Iraqi case, the image of a totalitarian regime has been employed in order to lobby for a US-led military intervention, which is well documented for the case of Kanan Makiya (e.g. Steinberg 2003; Johnson 2006).¹¹ The concept served to highlight a form of dictatorship which was supposedly more despicable than others and therefore urgently needed to be overthrown.

Legitimacy and Traditional Culture

The second dominant way of dealing with the 'effects' of symbolic policies in Ba'athist Iraq is to employ the notion of 'traditional legitimacy', which—as outlined above—links official discourse with the question of belief. Among those who employ this concept, one frequently encounters essentialising assumptions about the cultural dispositions of the population of Iraq, perceived to be characterised by its 'traditional' (political) culture' (Jabar 2003:163). This is particularly salient if the analysis turns to the employment of Islamic imagery and rhetoric or other supposedly 'traditional' symbols in the later stages of Ba'athist rule.

One example that many scholars have mentioned in this regard is the release of a family tree of Saddam Hussein, tracing his lineage back to 'Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the prophet Muhammad and a crucial figure in Shi'i religious and political thinking. Baram, for example, while cautious about the degree of popularity which the introduction of the Mesopotamian trend might have achieved among the majority of the population, asserts that in the case of the family tree, Saddam Hussein 'is trying to build the foundations of his personal legitimacy on solid rock' (1991:138). This implies that Iraq consists of a predominantly 'traditional' or 'pious' public and that it would be automatically prone to believe that Saddam Hussein is a descendant of 'Ali on the basis of its piety. In

¹¹ In interviews after the 2003 invasion, Makiya conceded that post-1991 Iraq was not as totalitarian as he had pictured it but rather constituted a 'criminal state' (e.g. Makiya 2005).

a similar way, Bengio tries to explain the Islamisation of official symbolism by arguing that the socialist and secular rhetoric of the 1970s did not connect to the lived experience of (potential) supporters of the regime who merely repeated the well-known slogans but failed to ascribe any personal significance to them. In contrast, she claims that Saddam Hussein's increasing usage of Qur'anic language and imagery 'found a powerful echo in the minds of a basically traditional public' (Bengio 1998:204, 159-61).

One way to hold on to such assertions and still to concede that some of the claims made by the regime were fairly exaggerated is to draw a line between 'manipulation' and 'authenticity'. Analysing the personality cult of Saddam Hussein, Bengio thus remarks:

The methods of state and party propagandists, even though they used all modern information techniques, were surprisingly similar to those of ancient times. [...] However exaggerated and magnified this personality cult became, there is no denying that it contained an element of historical authenticity and continuity. In Iraq, it may have evoked a note familiar from the past and may therefore have been easier to obey (1998:70).

The assumption that Iraqi Society (or groups like *the Shi'a*, *the Kurds* and *the Sunnis* respectively) constitutes a homogeneous entity and that people react in the same way, based on a cultural disposition shared by 'the populace at large' makes traditional legitimacy a highly problematic concept in this context. As scholars like Batatu have remarked, many political movements that have left important imprints on modern Iraqi history—e.g. the Free Officers, the Communists, the Ba'ath—trace their origins back to broad socio-economic and political changes, which led to the erosion of old ties, loyalties and concepts (Batatu 1978:1113). These changes and new orientations cannot enter the analysis on such a conceptual basis.

The concept of legitimacy also implies that symbols are 'culturally resonant' by themselves—which is why they can be used to 'manipulate' the populace and to enhance a regime's legitimacy—and that the position of power of 'the speaker' and the context in which 'the audience' finds itself matters little (cp. Wedeen 1999:9). This does not consider the importance of socialisation through state-sponsored institutions and practices, nor does it adequately conceptualise the relation between symbolic and repressive aspects of domination. Language (or 'culture', for that matter) should not be treated as a realm that is outside power relations. The power, for example, to make people reiterate regime slogans in Ba'athist Iraq (which they may or may not have believed in) was intimately connected to the possibility of—violent—enforcement of compliance and to the threat of repression (Davis 2005:5).

It seems in summary that the most prominent analyses of symbolic forms of domination in Ba'athist Iraq either leave out the question of effects of political rhetoric and symbols, or they assume an automatic response to certain symbols by a public deemed to be a homogeneous entity due to either its traditionalism or to a 'reign of fear'. In some accounts, the two concepts are linked. 'Legitimacy' then applies to the regime's employment of 'traditional' symbols and their social bases, whereas 'totalitarianism' accounts for the 'modern' aspects of the Ba'ath's rule (e.g. Bengio 1998, Mohsen 1994¹²). Some form of reductionism—the totalitarianism paradigm or cultural essentialism—therefore substitutes for a closer look at the diverse parts of the population and their differing positions regarding the regime, as well as their varying responses to state rhetoric and symbolism in changing social and political contexts.

12 In Mohsen's article about 'cultural totalitarianism', for example, the revival of Bedouin war poetry during the Iran-Iraq war is assumed to have appealed particularly to the rural and marshland population, whereas it is more generally assumed that any independent thinking was crushed and a shallow political culture erected in order to better control the populace (1994:10-5).

Indicators of Ambiguity, Resistance and Change

There is no social history of Ba'athist Iraq comparable to Batatu's (1978) seminal study on monarchical and early republican Iraq. Yet even without a large number of empirical studies, the few accounts there are about everyday life under Saddam Hussein as well as oppositional movements and their origins make it obvious that the two approaches described above suffer from several shortcomings and should be revised.

The Ambiguity of Official Rhetoric

There are a number of studies and personal impressions about parts of Iraqi society (predominantly from the phase after 1991) which suggest that state-sponsored symbolic production and its reception were a lot more ambiguous and contradictory than suggested by the paradigms outlined above. One of the reasons, for example, why many people could initially not believe that the 'Baghdad Blogger', a young Iraqi who began writing a web-diary from Baghdad in 2002, was real might have been the widespread assumption that Iraq was indeed a 'republic of fear' in which people would not dare to think, let alone write, witty criticisms of the Ba'ath regime and its exaggerated symbolism (cp. Pax 2003).

Most of these accounts share the assumption that official rhetoric and symbolism assumed an increasingly shallow and contradictory quality from the 1980s, but particularly from 1991 up to the regime's overthrow.¹³ According to Darle, there was a notable shift in the way the regime exercised authority in symbolic terms. Whereas it promoted a relatively coherent 'modernist' or 'developmentalist' discourse in the 1970s, the years since 1979 witnessed a 'symbolic regression' to the point that the post-1991 regime hardly acted as a producer of social meaning any more and considerably disengaged itself from functions such as education, administration, associational life, etc., which it had previously monopolised. This space was increasingly filled by religious and tribal groups, a development which the regime actively began to encourage from the late 1980s. It still commanded a monopoly in the official public sphere¹⁴ but its discourse was characterised by increasing arbitrariness and ambiguity (Darle 2003:17-24, see also Davis 2005:197, Baran 2004:18).

One interesting example for the erratic quality of official symbolism is given by one of Darle's interlocutors who recounts an average evening programme on state TV, in which the call to prayer is followed by the broadcast of a belly dancing show in which women 'show their bodies' (ibid.:56). If one views the regime's increasing use of Islamic language in a context of such everyday practice, its coherence and persuasive capability becomes quite dubious (cp. also Baran 2004:64-9). To the observers, the regime—at least after 1991—did not try to elicit consent or belief in the appropriateness of its symbols but contented itself with outward compliance and dissimulation (cp. Darle 2003:38-9, Baran 2004:30).

Still, this official discourse should be regarded as crucial for the system of control and self-control which dominated public expression under the Ba'ath. It cluttered public space, producing guidelines for public speech and behaviour and implying where the red lines were. Thereby, it provided the base for the public reiteration of official slogans, implicated Iraqis in the representation of authority and prevented alternative voices and views from articulating themselves (cp. Baran 2004:16-9, Darle 2003).

13 There are different estimates regarding whether the 1980s witnessed mounting or decreasing levels of support for the regime. Davis notes that the discourse of the 1980s, which focused ever more on the person of the president, 'did not resonate as effectively with the population at large compared to the state-sponsored memory of the 1970s' (2005:183), so that the prevailing notion among the population was 'resentment', although national feelings grew in general. Jabar on the other hand sees especially the defensive phase of the Iran-Iraq war after 1982 as one of high levels of support for Iraqi nationalism as well as for the regime (1994:98-101).

14 It seems, though, that some regime-backed new outlets for mounting frustrations emerged, e.g. in the Baghdadi theatre of the late 1990s, which displayed a surprising openness of expression and criticism (cp. Shadid 1999).

Pragmatic Forms of Participation and Complicity

Compliance did not just concern verbal articulation, but also showed in physical participation in different forms of representation of the regime's authority. While the 1980s witnessed actual mass mobilisation for the Iraqi popular army, in the 1990s 'phantom' forms of mobilisation spread. One example for this is the recruitment for the 'Jerusalem liberation army' (*jaysh tahrir al-Quds*), which started in the fall of 2000, after the start of the second *intifada* in the Occupied Territories and was accompanied by an orchestrated campaign. This 'volunteer army' was never deployed and presumably never meant to be deployed. However, according to official figures the regime mobilised around 7 million people (of a population of around 24 million) within two months and put them through general military training. According to observers, the 'army' was subject to considerable ridicule among Iraqis, as its inactivity regarding actual combat was obvious. Still, there were various reasons for volunteering—small material rewards and other privileges, the option to be admitted to certain subjects at university, for parents the possibility of gaining extra points for their children's high-school diploma or, more generally, maintaining good relations with the party, which was perceived as crucial in order to be able to rent a flat, have a bank account, receive subsidies, food rations etc. These incentives apparently made forceful methods of recruitment dispensable (cp. Baran 2004:27-30, 82-6). The participation itself, i.e. the real physical strain of the training camps and the parades in which volunteers took place visibly demonstrated the regime's power to command an orchestrated arrangement of bodies without an immediate function except for the mass disciplining and implication of its citizens.

Other, recurring forms of mass participation included active membership in the Ba'ath party and attendance at regular party meetings and events, public voting (as in the plebiscites for Saddam Hussein held in 1995 and 2002), as well as the participation in parades or public celebrations demonstrating allegiance to the regime or against its alleged enemies. According to Baran, incentives for participation resembled that of volunteering for the 'Jerusalem liberation army'—small privileges, a slight elevation in the power hierarchy and the chance to stay away from trouble with the authorities. Also, spectacles like the president's birthday orchestrated like a public fair reportedly attracted a large number of actually voluntary visitors, as they provided a welcome contrast to the straining everyday life under the sanctions regime and an occasion for distraction and enjoyment (cp. Baran 2004:62-86).

The success of such forms of mass participation suggests that an approach like 'politics as if' is appropriate for Ba'athist Iraq as well, at least for the years since 1991.¹⁵ They were not so much based on belief (e.g. that the army was indeed going to 'liberate Jerusalem') nor on pure fear, as the notions of legitimacy and totalitarianism would suggest, but were still effective. They contributed to an internalisation of power relations and a physical implication of a mass of citizens in the exercise of authority. However, these general observations need to be broken down to the level of different social groups, locations etc. in varying contexts in order to be able to determine the actual engagement of Iraqis with official symbolism and discourse.

Compliance and Subversion among the Baghdadi Intelligentsia

The only social group whose 'technologies of the self' have been subject to closer empirical examination are the urban (Baghdadi) middle classes. Darle has explored how a part of Baghdadi society, which he calls 'the anomic segment', made sense of its everyday experiences of an 'ambiguous and alienating environment' and the extent to which regime discourse shaped these experiences, particularly in the late 1990s and early 2000s (2003:11-3). This segment—non-Ba'athist, urban 'intellectuals' working as teachers, clerks, engineers, artists or in other occupations associated

15 Detailed observations about such forms of participation are only available concerning this period, and one might speculate that public spectacles accompanied by mobilisation for an actual war could have had a different effect on participants.

with the 'modernist' project who identified neither as tribal nor as religious in a communal sense due to their socialisation in the modernist spirit—could not rely on such alternative spaces of production of meaning. Accordingly, they found themselves in a state of deep disorientation, as their outlook on the world did not correspond to social realities and state-sponsored symbolic production any more. One of the forms in which this segment coped with this ambiguous and unpredictable socio-political environment was to engage in 'circles of sociability' with like-minded friends, in which, among other things, rumours and political jokes could be exchanged. Darle interprets this as a kind of 'therapeutical' activity, which absolved individuals from engaging in active opposition (ibid.:74-9). Outwardly, they conformed to the guidelines prescribed by the official discourse (ibid.:130).

Davis (2005:200-26) has looked at another type of arrangement with the symbolic dominance of the regime and explored the activities of 'accommodating' intellectuals who ostensibly worked for the Ba^cth regime but still tried to maintain a degree of integrity. From an analysis of several social science and history texts published for or at Baghdad university in the 1980s, he concludes that a recourse to the past not only constituted part of the state's effort to appropriate historical memory, but also opened up spaces for subtle criticisms and *double entendre*, e.g. by way of exaggeration—so that Iraqi students would understand the criticism—or by avoiding all Ba^cthist terminology. Looking at secondary level history textbooks, he also states that 'the Ba^cthist project seems to have only superficially entered the educational curriculum' (2005:224). Texts about the *Qadisiyya* campaign, for example, were hastily added to the end of books and not really linked to the main body. This could be interpreted as another form of subtle transgression by ministry officials.

While such forms of transgression did not openly challenge the regime but rather contributed to its staying in power, these accounts confirm that the state's grip on cultural production was not as total as suggested by the totalitarianism paradigm. There is a certain arbitrariness to such observations about a narrow social segment, which is privileged in terms of education, and one should not deduce a general ability of Iraqis to decode and filter official rhetoric and symbolism from this.¹⁶ However, if one starts out with the assumption that independent thinking did not exist after 1975 due to a reign of fear or with the notion legitimacy based on a traditional outlook of the populace, such questions do not even come to mind.

Compliance and Subversion among Iraqi Shi^cis

Whereas the above-mentioned studies particularly question the validity of assuming a 'total grip on the minds' through *forms* of symbolic domination, existing accounts of resistance shed further doubt on the claim that the *content* of regime-sponsored symbolic production automatically appealed to particular parts of the population. I will illustrate this using the example of the Iraqi Shi^ca.

Firstly, nominal belonging to a religious community does thus not suffice to explain political affiliation. Iraqi Shi^cis do not constitute a homogeneous group and their religious identity cannot be taken for granted. Scholars like Batatu, Zubaida or Jabar have demonstrated that on the one hand Iraqi Shi^cis were divided by a number of cleavages in different social and spatial contexts, e.g. by different class, urban-rural, tribal/non-tribal or secular-religious dichotomies, which amounted to differing 'value systems, economic interests and political orientations' (Jabar 2003:162). Socio-economic changes like impoverishment and rural-urban migration coincided with new political orientations of Iraqi Shi^cis, among which the support of markedly secular parties like the Iraqi Communist Party but also of the Ba^cth party was prominent (Zubaida 1990:90-4). On the other hand, even among those Shi^cis identifying as religious religiosity took on different forms, e.g. 'popular ceremonial ritualism' as against the legalist theology of the clerical class (Jabar 2003:162). Even the clerics were internally

¹⁶ It is questionable, for example, if Davis' assertion that a continuous loss of allegiance took place over the years and that the rhetoric became 'increasingly shrill' (2005:177), is not due more to the author's own judgement and his observations among a narrow social sector than to broader social realities.

divided not only by their different convictions regarding involvement in politics but also by their Arab or Iranian origin, which became a cleavage of significant impact during the Iran-Iraq war (Batatu 1981:593-4).

As much as it is therefore unhelpful to view *the* Iraqi Shi'a as one homogeneous group clinging to the same, supposedly religiously based convictions over time, it is equally flawed to consider official Islamic rhetoric as appealing *per se* to all religiously identifying persons. Even if Muslim identity becomes an important part of people's political identities in a certain context, this still does not mean that they will believe in the claims of a regime to represent religion. The emergence of 'religious' opposition even in places where the reference to Islam has constituted an important part of official rhetoric (e.g. Saudi-Arabia) points to the fact that the position of the 'speaker' as well as the social and political context will greatly influence the degree of credibility that such claims can achieve (Crystal 1994:278).

A closer look at the changing political affiliations of Iraqi Shi'is confirms this argument. After the outbreak of riots in 1977 in the provinces of Najaf and Karbala (which followed the interference of the authorities in the *ashura'* ceremonies), the Ba'th regime pursued a carrot-and-stick policy vis-à-vis the Shi'a. On the one hand it offered some political as well as symbolic concessions—a number of Shi'is were appointed to the RCC and, as outlined above, the regime promoted itself as a protector of the Shi'a and their holy places and started to pay tribute to Islam rhetorically. At the same time, it cracked down brutally on Islamic activists, e.g. by executing the leader of the Islamic movement, Muhammad Baqr as-Sadr as well as his sister in 1980 and rounding up the most important activists of the Da'wa party, and started to deport thousands of Iraqi Shi'is with Iranian passports—alleged 'Iranian elements'—out of the country. These measures gave a serious blow to the Shi'i religious opposition movement in Iraq (Batatu 1981:590-3, Bengio 1985: 8-12).

It is hard to assess the degree to which the symbolic integration offered by the regime at this time contributed to the acquiescence of most Shi'a in the following years. Factors like the absence of a leadership figure that could unite the fragmented sectors of Iraq's Shi'i population, as well as material concessions and fear of persecution have to be taken into account as well. During the Iran-Iraq war, in which the bulk of ordinary soldiers consisted of Shi'is, there were few desertions and the level of Shi'i opposition was comparatively low. This attests to the increasing hold of Iraqi nationalism among almost all sectors of the population through the experience of war, but it is unclear if this tacit support should be accorded to the state of Iraq as such or to the Ba'th regime.¹⁷ Whatever its exact reasons—after the end of the war and particularly during and after the second Gulf War, dissatisfaction rose, particularly in the course of mounting economic problems, the unwillingness of many ordinary soldiers to participate in another war and the subsequent experience of humiliating retreat (Jabar 1994:101-3). It eclipsed in a series of popular uprisings in March 1991, which started in the southern towns of the country but took over in the North as well. In the south, the most prominent slogans of the insurgents called for Shi'a rule and for the establishment of an Islamic state (ibid.:108-9). The regime's Islamic rhetoric, which was particularly pronounced at this point—Saddam Hussein claimed, for example, that he was called upon by God to invade Kuwait—apparently did little to appease the protesters (ibid.:104). Adopting a hegemony approach, one could posit that the regime was not able to integrate these parts of Iraqi society on a material and political plane at this point, so that its rhetoric did not fall on fertile grounds.

One can conclude from the differing levels of support of Iraqi Shi'is to the regime or oppositional voices that it is not Islamic imagery as such which is resonant and thereby produces legitimacy. Neither is it helpful to assume a pre-existing 'oppositional' interest of particular ethnic or religious groups like in the model of *ethno-politics* or *confessionalism*, on the basis of which it has been claimed for example that the Iraqi Shi'a, constituting the majority of the Iraqi population, should have an

17 Batatu observed that those Shi'is who joined ranks with the Ba'th were impelled 'more by interest than conviction and tend to be careerists rather than devotees' (1981:593).

interest in taking over political rule (e.g. Ibrahim 1991). It is more rewarding to think of ethnicity, tradition or religion as sources of meaning which can be drawn on in specific contexts as means to elicit consent for a regime as well as to mobilise opposition against it. The effects of the contents of official symbolic production very much depend on these specific contexts.¹⁸

Future Directions: 'Politics As If', Hegemony and Common Sense

The above-mentioned studies show that the actual situation was much more ambiguous than is implied by 'totalitarianism' or 'traditional legitimacy', regarding the coherence of official discourse as well as its reception among different parts of the population in changing contexts. Even if the perspectives for actual empirical research in Iraq are still bleak, it will most likely become easier to gain access to relevant archives and thereby acquire more differentiated ideas of what everyday life under the Ba'ath was like. As I have demonstrated above, the choice of conceptual tools is crucial in this endeavour as it has a decisive influence on which areas are deemed important for research and how they are researched.

Two approaches seem particularly suitable for guiding future research on symbolic domination. The first is that of 'governmentality' or 'politics as if'. This approach regards symbolic forms of domination as relatively autonomous from socio-economic contexts as well as independent from the belief in the appropriateness of rule. It is also not primarily interested in the content of symbolic forms of domination, but in the techniques on which they rely.

Such an approach makes it possible to acknowledge and analyse internal contradictions and ambiguities in official rhetoric and imagery, and to rethink its effects on this basis. Makiya and others have drawn attention to the power of authoritarian regimes to shape thinking and behaviour but due to their theoretical framework have overestimated the coherence of official discourse as well as the destructive role of fear. However, the effects of symbolic domination on forms of disciplining and perceiving the self deserve more scholarly attention. Particularly Darle (2003) and Baran (2004) have analysed the regime's discourse and its disciplinary effects on the basis of its ambiguity and arbitrariness and looked at forms of internalisation of power relations. However, these observations have had a rather general character so far.

This approach can also shed new light on the linkage between domination and resistance. The assumption that domination and resistance share the same social space and therefore structurally resemble each other could, for example, provide a useful perspective for a closer examination of the 1991 *intifada*. Looking at its particularistic slogans promoting Shi'a rule (cf. Jabar 1994:108), one could argue that the regime's commandment of a symbolic monopoly as far as 'the whole of Iraq' was concerned as well as its tacit acceptance and promotion of particularistic discourses constituted one relevant factor which prevented communication between different groups and the emergence of shared political ideas. Thus, the regime's symbolic-disciplinary strategies would have significantly contributed to the failure of the revolt. Similar questions could be asked regarding the present political situation and the legacies of symbolic domination of the Ba'ath: Which frames of reference are used if political groups claim to speak for 'the whole of Iraq', and to what extent do such expressions build on the imagery and rhetoric of the old regime? To what extent do the old techniques of particularisation live on?

18 A similar argument could be made about the waxing and waning of tribalism under Saddam Hussein. Tribes and tribal identifications are not constant in time and space, so that official employment of tribal symbols did not have a 'natural' appeal. The regime's symbolic resurrection of tribal imagery, starting in the late 1980s, was closely connected to changing social realities in the aftermath of the first and second Gulf wars, in which tribalism emerged and was promoted as a new mechanism of allocation and distribution, as well as a form to maintain order in rural areas where the degree of state control had lessened. The new appeal of tribalism as a form of political identification is thus closely connected to these changing contexts and has little to do with the 'traditional' character of Iraqi society (see Baran 1997, Jabar 2000).

The approach of 'politics as if', however, runs the danger of inadequate generalisation if it does not explicitly relate to the 'technologies of the self' of different social groups. The only group which has been addressed in more detail so far is the urban intelligentsia, a rather small part of Iraqi society that was marginalised in the official discourse of the 1990s and after. It would be interesting to explore how other groups who were implicated more by the regime's imagery and rhetoric or who possessed alternative sources of meaning reacted to and engaged with official rhetoric and symbolism in comparison. The risk of generalisation also concerns different phases of Ba'ath rule. It should not generally be posited that state-sponsored symbolic production was completely arbitrary and exaggerated so that compliance was based on dissimulation without belief or persuasion. As the existing studies suggest, this characterised official discourse after 1991. However, earlier efforts to promote a particular understanding of community and of a common origin of all Iraqis might have had a considerable persuasive power, at least for the educated classes and particularly those with a Sunni background (cp. Davis 2005:9-10).

In order to analyse these efforts and their persuasive power regarding different groups in changing socio-political contexts a resort to Gramsci, particularly to his concept of hegemony, is advisable. Firstly, it has a greater dynamism than the notion of 'politics as if'. It can direct attention to the state's role as an educator, i.e. the attempt to transform socio-political values and thinking and thereby to prevent potentially counter-hegemonic groups from forming alternative ideas. This idea has been used to explore the regime's efforts to appropriate historical memory (Davis 2005). It could be expanded to study the socialising role of institutions like schools, religious institutions, party and mass organisations as well as media like state television and radio in more detail.

Secondly, the concept of hegemony stresses the linkage between symbolic and socio-economic as well as political forms of inclusion and exclusion. I have tried to outline this linkage and, at times, disjuncture, using the example of different responses to state symbolism and rhetoric among Iraqi Shi'ite groups. The same approach could be applied in order to further contextualise the symbolic revival of tribalism from the late 1980s, i.e. its connection to new socio-political arrangements between the regime and tribal groups. Such an approach can provide a kind of safeguard against essentialisms or reductionisms relating to 'culture'. It can also ensure that the analysis of symbolic domination does not content itself with general observations but always relates them to specific parts of society in changing contexts.

Finally, hegemony is thought of as a continuous struggle, which implies that there is never a state of unambiguous and unquestioned authority (as suggested by the totalitarianism paradigm). The concept thus invites to look out for changes and challenges to the rule of the Ba'ath and to explore further spaces where the regime's discourse was challenged or subverted. In order to be able to identify such spaces, groups and discourses, one could draw on another important Gramscian concept, that of the 'common sense' denoting the incoherent set of assumptions and beliefs of particular societies or milieus. Gramsci assumed that the subjectivity of subaltern groups is usually composed of various layers, consisting of everyday lore, religious and folkloric practices, fragments of knowledge from different times and hegemonic projects, etc. Accordingly, the struggle for hegemony focuses on tapping and shaping the common sense of different milieus (cp. Gramsci 1971:199, 323-30). Employing this notion and inquiring into components of the common sense in varying contexts could give clues to why the Ba'ath regime tried to tap specific images and symbols and also indicate where forms of transgression and opposition might have emerged from in different milieus. Thus, it can safeguard against too coherent a notion of technologies of the self under the Ba'ath rule, imagining the role of the state in processes of subjectivation as encompassing. A hegemonic understanding of technologies of the self can help identify the different layers of subjectivity of particular groups in specific historic contexts.

In summary, both approaches, the Foucaultian as well as the Gramscian, could direct future empirical research into new areas, the results of which are likely to shed further doubts on the notion of Ba'athist Iraq as a totalitarian polity in which all independent reasoning was erased (or alternatively,

as one based on traditional culture). This is because they are more open-ended and make it possible to explore ambiguities and changes. Of course, this does not mean that there are no other concepts or approaches from which the study of symbolic forms of domination in Ba'athist Iraq could benefit. Based on the previous criticism of the dominant concepts of totalitarianism and traditional legitimacy, however, I would formulate three requirements which any 'political ethnography of power' (Wedeen 1999:25) should fulfil: Firstly, it should be sensitive to the power to shape thought and public conduct through techniques of symbolic domination. Secondly, it needs to be able to conceive social diversity and varying degrees of inclusion and exclusion of different parts of the population as a basis for diverse responses to official rhetoric and imagery. And finally, it needs to be able to conceptualise the possibility of change, transgression and resistance. Only an approach that considers these three aspects will be able to do away with the stereotypical notion of Ba'athist Iraq as a 'republic of fear' and to explore the effects of symbolic domination in more depth.

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