

The Image of Saddam Hussein and Collective Memory: The Semiotics of Ba'ath Regime's Mural in Iraq (1980-2003)

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Abstract : During the Ba'ath Party's rule in Iraq, propaganda was utilized to justify and to promote Saddam Hussein's image in the collective memory as the greatest Arab leader. Consequently, urban walls were routinely covered with images of Saddam. Relying on these images, the regime aimed to provide a basis for evoking meanings in the public opinion, which would supposedly strengthen Saddam's power and reconstruct facts to legitimize his political ideology. Nonetheless, Saddam was not always portrayed with common and explicit elements but in certain periods of his rule, the paintings depicted him in an unusual context, where various historical and contemporary elements were combined in a narrative background. Therefore, an understanding of the implied socio-political references of these elements is required to fully elucidate the impact of these images on forming the memory and collective unconscious of the Iraqi people. To obtain such understanding, one needs to address the following questions: a) How Saddam Hussein is portrayed in mural during his rule? b) What of elements and mythical-historical narratives are found in the paintings? c) Which Saddam's political views were subject to the collective memory through mural? Employing visual semiotics, this study reveals that during Saddam Hussein's regime, the paintings were initially simple portraits but gradually transformed into narrative images, characterized by a complex network of historical, mythical and religious elements. These elements demonstrate the transformation of a secular-nationalist politician into a Muslim ruler who tried to instill three major policies in domestic and international relations i.e. the arabization of Iraq, as well as the propagation of pan-arabism ideology (first period), the implementation of anti-Israel policy (second period) and the implementation of anti-American-British policy (last period).

Keywords : Ba'ath Party, Saddam Hussein, mural, Iraq, propaganda, collective memory

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