
Review

Necropolitics

Achille Mbembe

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Achille Mbembe consistently offers capacious terms through which to think about the nexus between state formation and race-making in the modern world. In the first of his works translated into English, *On the Postcolony* (2001), Mbembe situates the institutions, techniques, and procedures of the postcolonial state in forms of colonial race-making that reduced the native to an object whose body, life, and labor was appropriated for wealth accumulation. Mbembe argues that the consequences of reducing Africans to objects never faded, but continue to haunt the ways in which the postcolonial African state functions. There is no break for Mbembe between the race-making processes of colonial sovereign power and the techniques and procedures of the postcolonial state. Rather, he underscores processes of entanglement, where older forms of colonial sovereign power are re-established on new grounds in the postcolonial era. In his second work, *Critique of Black Reason* (2017), Mbembe continues to track the entanglements between old and new, past and present. He interrogates Black reason as the specific racial logic through which human beings are conferred the status of objecthood. Mbembe's second work is also deeply preoccupied with articulating the possibility of emancipation from the status of objecthood, which Mbembe had left underexplored in *On the Postcolony*. Here, he asks how the condition of Blackness opens up a space from which to articulate political community and a fuller conception of humanism. What possibilities for radical insurgency and transformation can those who have been racialized as Black and subject to objecthood imagine and institute? In *Critique of Black Reason*, race is both the site of subjection to objecthood and the locale from which to envision and enact broader societal transformation. It is the ground on which to articulate 'a humanism made to the measure of the world' (Césaire, 2000, p. 73).

It is this question of generating a humanism out of the experience of incessant relegation to objecthood that Mbembe picks up in his third work translated into English, *Necropolitics*. Mbembe's categories for thinking through race-making and state formation are historically situated, yet always elastic enough to capture new



racial realities. *Necropolitics* pursues the themes of race and sovereign power as they relate to borders, prisons, war, and policing in the wake of decolonization and the aftermath of the U.S. civil rights struggle. Mbembe connects these seemingly disparate institutions through his concept of necropolitics. His first elaboration of necropolitics is a pithy formulation in the introductory chapter ‘The Ordeal of the World.’ Here, he writes, ‘nearly everywhere the political order is re-constituting itself as a form of organization for death’ (p. 6). Indeed, borders, prisons, war, and policing are the central death-making institutions that do the work of re-organizing the political order in such a way that make human life precarious, expendable, and unprotected by the liberal democratic order. Furthermore, Mbembe underscores that the proliferation of modern death-making institutions not only makes premature death more pervasive but also drastically erodes the nature of social and political life so that citizens are transformed into the ‘living dead’ (p. 92).

Mbembe’s intervention here is significant. He argues that the notion of necropolitics captures facets of contemporary social and political life that work on biopolitics in political theory cannot adequately describe or theorize (p. 92). In focusing on the state of exception, or the abrogation of the regime of rights, which endowed citizens with a political and legal identity, the framework of biopolitics focuses exclusively on the contradictions of the liberal democratic state’s juridical structure. The question for Mbembe is less about the termination of rights that create politically dead subjects whose lives can be taken by the state without immediate consequences, and more about the capitalist state’s inherent propensity to create conditions that make living impossible. Given this, *Necropolitics* offers a powerful framework through which to conceptualize the different facets of racialized poverty such as mass incarceration, police murders, dilapidated housing, lack of access to health care, food deserts, and the disproportionate exposure to environmental toxins and pollutants. The concept of necropolitics captures the ways in which sovereign power creates these life-eliminating conditions that kill and make socially dead citizens. For Mbembe, it is not so much that necropolitics produces a state of exception, or that the exception becomes the norm, as in the biopolitical framework, but rather that death-making institutions have always been the norm for those subject to racialized poverty.

The arc of the book is characteristically non-linear. Mbembe takes up a number of themes that are seemingly unconnected but are nevertheless organized around the problematic of necropolitics, which receives its clearest elaboration in chapter 3. The book expands outwards from this anchoring chapter, which forms the spine of the book. Around this chapter, Mbembe situates three chapters on democracy (chapters 1, 2, and 4) and two chapters on humanism (chapters 5 and 6). Chapter 1 takes up the question of liberal democracy and the constitutive violence of its founding, while chapter 2 explores the relationship between liberal democracy and the outsider, which is persistently demarcated through racializing and bordering practices. These two early chapters of the book articulate how the necropolitical



logic constantly resurfaces in liberal democracies because of their inability to confront the founding violence of dispossession, exploitation, and extraction. The necropolitical logic is the norm of liberal democracies that has never been confronted but only mediated and displaced by its institutions. Mbembe expands the question of the constitutive violence of western liberal democracies to the global scale in chapter 4 by taking up the planetary implications of living in political systems that are grounded in the fundamental contradiction between democracy and violence.

The final two chapters of the book take up the problem of humanism in the work of Frantz Fanon and in contemporary debates in Afro-pessimism and Afro-futurism. Fanon has always been Mbembe's guide for understanding contemporary social and political order, and this remains the case in *Necropolitics*. Chapter 5, titled 'Fanon's Pharmacy,' takes up the binaries of death-making and life-making that necropolitics opens up, which are the dual dynamics that Fanon constantly balanced and negotiated as a revolutionary physician. Fanon's insights provide the springboard for Mbembe to intervene into contemporary debates about the human and posthuman in Afro-pessimism and Afro-futurism in the final chapter. Here, he sharpens his focus on how to think about a common humanity when death-making institutions abandon populations at the threshold between life and death in order to occupy the subjectivity of the living dead.

Mbembe's commitment to articulating a common humanity as praxis, or as a humanity in creation, when institutions of life-making, care, and social reproduction are subjugated to the overwhelming power of death-making institutions, is what sets *Necropolitics* apart from other literatures that take up these questions. In political theory, there has been a longstanding investigation of the ways in which life is subject to the projections and calculations of sovereign power. Giorgio Agamben, Michel Foucault, and Hannah Arendt have developed distinct approaches to this question. However, with the exception of Arendt, these thinkers reject or evade the question of what it means to be distinctly human in the face of constant predation, capture, and degradation by sovereign power. Mbembe, who thinks with Fanon, and writes from the tradition of Black political thought, has no choice but to confront this question boldly and unequivocally, for the struggle to regenerate a humanism out of the experience of social death is the lifeblood of this tradition. Carefully unpacking and mediating the problems of positing a universal conception of humanity, Mbembe sketches the contours of a humanism grounded in vulnerability by centering the body that is exposed to pain, suffering, and degradation (p. 175). This Fanonian conception of what it means to be human provides the basis, for Mbembe, for centering relations of care as crucial to reconstituting a democracy in crisis. If, for Arendt, democratic citizenship involved a specifically human way of answering, talking back, and measuring up what happens in the public sphere, for Mbembe it involves the cultivation of care and



solicitude for the Other as well as an openness to the pain and suffering of the Other.

Despite the boldness of Mbembe's inquiry into a humanism to come, we are left wanting more. His analysis of necropolitics and its constitutive relationship with democracy is far more sophisticated and compelling than his sketches of a humanism forged in the crucible of capitalism, race-making, and sovereign power. The concluding chapter, 'Ethics of the Passerby,' indicates that a humanism grounded in care and recognition of common vulnerability could be generated out of movement, passages, and crossings, underscoring the importance of the rights of mobility as a central democratic institution for cultivating a deeper sense of what it means to be human. These are just gestures, however, and the vagueness of Mbembe's propositions invite artistic, activist, and scholarly interventions from others. It also suggests that *Necropolitics* is unfinished and discloses a space from which we can anticipate Mbembe writing in the future.

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