


Politics of Death and the Limits of Democracy: A Review of Achille Mbembe's Necropolitics

Book Review

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Achille Mbembe. (2019). *Necropolitics*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Achille Mbembe's *Necropolitics* (2019) offers a profound and unsettling rethinking of sovereignty, democracy, and violence in the modern world. Extending Michel Foucault's concept of *biopolitics*, Mbembe introduces the notion of *necropolitics*—the exercise of power through the control of death. His central claim is that political modernity, particularly Western liberal democracy, is founded on the systemic production and management of death. Far from being exceptional, such violence constitutes the very grammar of modern power.

Reconceptualizing Sovereignty and the Politics of Death

For Mbembe, the sovereign is defined not merely by the right to decide over life, but by the capacity to impose death. In the contemporary world, states and institutions create “death worlds” where marginalized populations—racialized, colonized, or displaced—exist in conditions between life and death. Racism functions as the organizing principle of this order, determining whose lives are valued and whose can be extinguished without consequence. The plantation, colony, and concentration camp, Mbembe argues, are historical templates for this politics of death (p. 19).

This argument leads to a powerful indictment of Western liberal democracy. Far from representing a universal ideal, democracy emerges from the violent foundations of slavery, colonialism, and imperialism. The rights and freedoms of the privileged few were purchased through the dehumanization and extermination of others. Mbembe terms this legacy “democracy's bitter sediments” (p. 20), a haunting reminder that liberal values are built upon colonial violence that persists in new forms—racial capitalism, militarized borders, and global surveillance.

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Colonial Continuities and the Modern Deathscape

Mbembe extends this critique to the postcolonial state, which he contends has often reproduced colonial logics of domination. Through case studies such as Israel's occupation of Palestine and the wars of decolonization in Africa and Asia (p. 24), he demonstrates how spaces of occupation and siege continue to define contemporary sovereignty. The fragmentation of authority—between states, militias, and private militaries—has created new “war machines” that govern through terror and disposability (p. 86). In this necropolitical landscape, the right to kill is no longer monopolized by the state but dispersed across a network of actors and technologies.

From Biopolitics to Necropolitics

Engaging Foucault's notion of *biopolitics*, Mbembe argues that modern power cannot be understood solely through the management of life. Instead, *necropolitics* exposes how sovereignty depends on the ability to determine the conditions of death. In *states of exception* and *states of siege* (p. 70)—from apartheid South Africa to occupied Palestine—the sovereign constantly redraws the boundaries of humanity, designating populations as disposable. Mbembe thus advances Foucault's theory by centering violence, race, and colonialism as foundational to modern governance.

Technology, Capitalism, and the Globalization of Death

Mbembe's chapter “Viscerality” connects necropolitics to the rise of digital surveillance and global capitalism. New technologies of control—biometric monitoring, data collection, and drone warfare—extend necropolitical power into the most intimate aspects of human life. Through what he calls “planetary entanglement” (p. 96), capitalism transforms death into a transnational enterprise, linking warfare, ecology, and the digital economy in a shared regime of domination.

The later chapters, “Fanon's Pharmacy” and “Stifling the Noonday,” address the psychic and cultural dimensions of necropolitics. Revisiting Frantz Fanon, Mbembe situates racism as a mechanism of power's self-preservation (p. 130). He calls for the decolonization of memory and representation, especially within institutions such as museums that continue to display colonized peoples as artifacts of another's history (p. 171).

Interdisciplinary Reach and Scholarly Impact

Drawing upon a wide array of sources—from political philosophy and psychoanalysis to history and cultural theory—Mbembe weaves a compelling and interdisciplinary argument. His discussion of the “war on terror,” drone warfare, and digital capitalism situates *Necropolitics* firmly within twenty-first-century debates. The book's engagement with thinkers such as Fanon, Césaire, Foucault, and Arendt situates it within a rich intellectual genealogy of anti-colonial and critical thought.



Evaluation and Significance

Mbembe's contribution lies in his ability to expose the necropolitical underside of modernity: the way global systems of governance depend on the continual reproduction of zones of death. His work challenges the liberal myth that modern politics is oriented toward life, showing instead that death remains the organizing logic of sovereignty.

The book's dense philosophical style may limit accessibility for general audiences, but its conceptual rigor makes it indispensable for scholars in political theory, postcolonial studies, and African philosophy. Mbembe's elegant prose, grounded in historical and contemporary examples, rewards close and sustained engagement.

Conclusion

Necropolitics stands as one of the most significant interventions in contemporary political theory. Mbembe's analysis dismantles the distinction between democracy and domination, revealing how the management of death defines the modern world. The book invites readers to imagine political life beyond necropower—beyond the hierarchies of race, nation, and humanity that sustain the present order. For scholars and thinkers concerned with sovereignty, violence, and decolonization, *Necropolitics* is an essential and transformative text.

Reference

Mbembe, A. (2019). *Necropolitics*. Duke University Press.



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