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WASTE OF HUMANITY AND SOVEREIGN POWER:
ACHILLE MBEMBE, READER OF GIORGIO AGAMBEN*†

Edson Teles
Universidade Federal de São Paulo, Guarulhos, SP, Brasil

Abstract
Starting from Achille Mbembe's essay Necropolitics (2003), in which the author lays the foundations for an argument about the existence of a politics of death born of colonial power, we seek to expose some elements of Giorgio Agamben's philosophy that have contributed to this formulation. This article proposes an approach to Agamben's concepts of "naked life", "state of exception" and "biopolitics", based on Mbembe's interpretation, which seeks to understand sovereign power in the face of the experience of the expansion of colonial power and its globalization in the twentieth century. By examining the strategies of objectifying populations considered disposable and diminishing their human condition, we seek to clarify aspects of the concept of necropolitics.

Keywords
Living dead, bare life, necropolitics, state of exception, democracy.

RESIDUOS DE HUMANIDAD Y PODER SOBERANO: ACHILLE MBEMBE, LECTOR DE GIORGIO AGAMBEN

Resumen
A partir del ensayo de Achille Mbembe Necropolítica (2003), en el que el autor sienta las bases de una argumentación sobre la existencia de una política de la muerte nacida del poder colonial, se exponen algunos elementos de la filosofía de Giorgio Agamben que han contribuido a esta formulación. Este artículo propone una aproximación a los conceptos agambenianos de «vida desnuda», «estado de excepción» y «biopolítica», a partir de la interpretación de Mbembe, con el objetivo de comprender el poder soberano frente a la experiencia de la expansión y globalización del poder colonial en el siglo XX. Al examinar las estrategias de cosificación de las poblaciones consideradas desechables y de disminución de su condición humana, se pretende aclarar aspectos del concepto de necropolítica.

Palabras clave
Muertos vivientes, nuda vida, necropolítica, estado de excepción, democracia.

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> *America is inhabited by peoples wondrously strange and savage, devoid of faith, law, religion, or any civility, living as irrational beasts—as nature produced them. They eat roots, remain perpetually naked, both men and women, until perhaps they are converted by Christians, through whom they may gradually shed this brutality to clothe themselves in a manner more civil and human. Here, we must praise the Creator who has enlightened us, sparing us from being as brutish as these wretched Amerindians.*
>
> *André Thevet (1555)*[1]

> *I invoke the notion of brutalism to describe an era dominated by the pathos of demolition and the planetary-scale production of reserves of obscurity.*
>
> *Achille Mbembe (2020)*[2]

In 2003, Cameroonian philosopher and historian Achille Mbembe unveiled a pivotal dimension of his theoretical and intellectual project through a surgical interrogation: "What place is given to life, to death, and to the human body – particularly the wounded or massacred body? How are they inscribed within the order of power?".[3] This passage appears in the introduction to his essay *Necropolitics*, where core concerns of contemporary political philosophy – sovereignty, biopolitics, and the state of exception – undergo a critical review. For Mbembe, this revision is essential to his investigation of the colonial model, through which he redefines politics as a "form of war".[4] The task is to recast the genesis of sovereign power and politics beyond events dictated solely by European thought, relocating the roots of the West's political paradigm in colonization, slavery, and the plantation.

Mbembe's questions forged a dialog with Eurocentric political philosophy that was constituted through critiques of modernity's theory and praxis. By engaging Global North thinkers like Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault, and Giorgio Agamben – while critically juxtaposing them with Afro-Caribbean voices (Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire) and postcolonial theorists (Edward Said, Paul Gilroy, Eyal Weizman, among others) – Mbembe devoted the ensuing years to formulating a critique of the "modern project of knowledge – and, crucially, of governance".[5]

For Mbembe, political action unfolds in the spaces and subjectivities that exists between life and death. Colonial power – which is not "structured by the binary of legal versus illegal" –[6] shaped necropolitical practices through racial categorization and the

[1] André Thevet was a geographer and Franciscan friar who accompanied a French expedition to Brazil (1555) in the capacity of chaplain, where he remained for ten weeks. His travel writings were first published in 1557 and became a cornerstone of French Renaissance thought. Thevet, *Les singularités de la France antartique. Le Brésil des Cannibales au XVIe siècle*, p. 49. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]
[2] Mbembe, *Brutalismo*, p. 13. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]
[3] Mbembe, *Necropolítica*, p. 7. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]
[4] Mbembe, *Necropolítica*, p. 6. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]
[5] Mbembe, *Crítica da razão negra*, p. 12. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]
[6] Mbembe, *Políticas da inimizade*, p. 51. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]

civilizational dichotomy of Self and Other. This power does not merely kill or reduce life to death, but subjugates existence to the play of deathly power, perpetuating precarious and subaltern bodies as sites of endless extraction. The "interlocking of multiple powers – disciplinary, biopolitical, and necropolitical – enables colonial domination in its absolute form".[7] Thus, colonial power inhabits both the body and the territory of the one it subjugates, extending its force into the very fabric of subjectivity, forging processes of subjectivation as mechanisms of control.

These practices have been updated in the contemporary globalized world through the imposition of supremacist power and neoliberal political economy. Necropolitics manifests as forms and practices that "subjugate life to the power of death". In the contemporary world, numerous structures and strategies are "deployed with the aim of inflicting maximum destruction upon people and creating *death-worlds* – singular and novel forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the *living dead*".[8]

In examining the analytical framework of necropolitics and the construction of "death-worlds," we are compelled to engage with Giorgio Agamben's theoretical apparatus. Notably, we discern the presence of the concepts of "bare life," "state of exception," and "camp". We do not intend to exhaust the theoretical relations between the conceptual frameworks of both authors, but rather to understand how the Cameroonian philosopher employed Agamben's concepts as tools of critique against modern thought and as an analysis of the contemporary political world. *Necropolitics* interrogates a global order where racism, terror, and violence proliferate, offering indispensable conceptual instruments to decode the present.

Introduction

The production of "death-worlds" is intrinsic to capitalism's organization of economy and, by extension, its social and political structures. To realize a necroeconomy of extraction – of bodies, land, planet, and humanity – at least two fundamental factors were necessary: the production of camps and the creation of the enemy.

On one hand, capitalism generates a surplus of populations no longer useful to the world of labor (the unemployed, immigrants, refugees, and precarious workers), for whatever reason, or who will be manipulated so as to justify war and establish new sources of extraction and profit. With the purpose of managing the remnants and excess populations, necropolitics has invested in spaces of confinement called "camps". For Mbembe, the contemporary world and its experiences of mass destruction allow for an understanding "of politics, sovereignty, and the subject different from that which we have inherited from the philosophical discourse of modernity".[9]

Confronted with bodies that defy the normative order of the modern State, these disqualified lives are cast into the "camp", "the space where the most absolute *condicio inhumana* ever witnessed on earth was realized" and which operates as "the hidden

[7] Mbembe, *Necropolítica*, p. 48. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]
[8] Mbembe, *Necropolítica*, p. 71. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]
[9] Mbembe, *Necropolítica*, p. 11. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]

matrix, the *nomos* of the political space we still inhabit".[10] The "camp" persists as a spatialized governance strategy for managing undesirable populations: refugees, favela residents, colonized territories' inhabitants, victims of forced displacement, carceral spaces, and peripheral zones. Confined within militarized and controlled spaces, these populations endure a "permanent condition of 'living in pain'",[11] which condition is utilized to amplify sovereign power and reinforce the political-juridical order that sustains it.

On the other hand, for the camp system to function effectively – that is, for its role in "producing death on a mass scale" to be legitimized –,[12] it was necessary to manufacture the target of its actions: the enemy. Under the rubric of war in its many forms – from the Wars on Terror and Drugs, the crackdown on "criminals" or troublemaker, to colonial wars, extraction-driven conflicts, and counterinsurgencies – social and institutional practices were mobilized against something "unrepresentable, almost nameless".[13] This enemy, marked for elimination, is framed as an existential threat to the lives of the living. This is a war that permits the eradication of "entire categories of citizens who, for whatever reason, are deemed unassimilable into the system".[14]

Necropolitical strategies operate through the capture and elimination of the enemy by means of a compartmentalization of space, but also of time and social practices. In an absurd complicity between economy, politics, biology, communication, and more, the extensive militarization of the planet, everyday life, and life itself (and death) is realized. In the contemporary world, the extractive political economy "characteristic of capitalism and democracy (...) is sustained by the intricate interplay of freedom, security, and protection against the omnipresence of threat, risk, and danger."[15]

The "bare life" and the "living dead"

In *Homo Sacer*, Giorgio Agamben engages with Foucauldian biopolitics while establishing significant distances. The Italian philosopher revisits Michel Foucault's definitions based on the ideas exposed in Volume 1 (*The Will to Knowledge*) of *The History of Sexuality*, published in 1976, and in the texts released in 1994 in the collection *Remarks and Queries*. These works contain the earliest characterizations of biopolitics, such as the transition from disciplinary power over individual bodies to the governance of the collective body of populations and the political importance of biological life. It is important to note that at the time of *Homo Sacer*'s publication, in 1995, Giorgio Agamben did not yet have access to Foucault's 1976 Collège de France course, *Society Must Be Defended*, which was only published in 1997. This appears to have limited Agamben's access to Foucault's presentation of race and war as determining elements of biopolitics in the twentieth century, as well as to his analysis of Nazi concentration camps as the extreme model of the statization of racism. Nonetheless, this did not prevent the Italian philosopher from formulating a critique of Foucauldian thought for its "abandonment of the traditional

[10] Agamben, *Meios sem fim*, p. 41. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]
[11] Mbembe, *Necropolítica*, p. 68. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]
[12] Mbembe, *Políticas da inimizade*, p. 63. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]
[13] Mbembe, *Políticas da inimizade*, p. 15. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]
[14] Agamben, *Estado de exceção*, p. 13. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]
[15] Mbembe, *Crítica da razão negra*, p. 147. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]

approach to the problem of power, based on juridical-institutional models (the definition of sovereignty, the theory of the State)".[16]

For Foucault, sovereign power transformed itself and activated a new mode of domination "which will not erase the first [sovereign power], but will penetrate it, permeate it, modify it". Unlike Foucault's trajectory, for whom it was more interesting to discuss "the mechanisms, techniques, and technologies of power" than the "political theory" of sovereign power,[17] Giorgio Agamben centers his research on the "hidden point of intersection between the juridical-institutional model and the biopolitical model of power".[18] If for Foucault biopolitics emerges with new mechanisms of power from the nineteenth century onwards, for Agamben "biopolitics is, in this sense, at least as old as the sovereign exception".[19] The intersection between biopolitics and the political-juridical model brings to light "the secret bond that unites power to bare life", this being "the original political element".[20]

In Agamben's framework, the non-localization of politics exposes bare life (*nuda vita*), a form of existence that can be subjected to torture and death without these acts constituting crimes. For such acts to remain legal, the suspension of the legal order is required, which precisely excludes this life through its inclusion as an unprotected biological being. The "bare life" emerges as the exception within an increasingly regulated world, where violence serves as both justification and maintenance of power.

Politics shifts from its central place in state institutions, spreading through the city, and the human becomes simultaneously "both subject and object of the political order and its conflicts, the common point between the organization of state power and emancipation from it". On one hand, "state power makes the living being its direct object," while on the other, "the living being appears no longer as *object* but as *subject* of political power".[21] Agamben identifies democracy's fundamental paradox: it seeks the emancipation of the subject through the very biological element (*zoe*) that marks its subjugation.

In determining the juridical rationalization of life, the sovereign establishes a threshold of ambiguity between inside/outside, internal/external – a liminal space that sustains the legal order. This reflects the common practice among modern states of employing exceptional measures for political and social control. The topological complexity of legal validation becomes clearer when considering the state of exception as foundational to legal order. The sovereign's decision on exception creates a boundary between what falls under the law and what lies beyond it.

Therefore, the legal order has a natural nexus with location, defining what lies within its territory and what is foreign to it. However, during the state of exception, the demarcation of what belongs or does not belong to the legal order becomes undefinable, topologically indistinct between exclusion and inclusion. This condition enables the unleashing of violence as an economy of social practices by sovereign power, with bare life becoming the central element of politics.

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[16] Agamben, *Homo sacer*, pp. 12–13. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]
[17] Foucault, *Em defesa da sociedade*, pp. 287–288. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]
[18] Agamben, *Homo sacer*, p. 14. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]
[19] Agamben, *Homo sacer*, p. 14. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]
[20] Agamben, *Homo sacer*, pp. 114 and 96. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]
[21] Agamben, *Homo sacer*, p. 17; *emphasis added*.

For Achille Mbembe, when conceptualizing the politics of death through Agamben's theory of the state of exception, sovereignty aims for "the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations".[22] Politics would be that which exceeds, a boundless act. The power to kill (or "right to kill") finds its normative foundation in the state of exception and its strategy in the consequent production of the enemy. This power/right becomes effective through the condition where the Other is perceived as a threat whose physical and existential elimination guarantees the survival of what is considered superior life.

Diverging from Agamben (while applying his thesis on the state of exception), Achille Mbembe positions the sovereign power to kill as the central practice of modern politics by relocating its genesis to another geopolitical site: "The colony represents the space where sovereignty fundamentally operates as power beyond the law, and where 'peace' increasingly wears the face of 'endless war'".[23] Modern sovereignty erases the boundaries between biological and political domains, culminating in a totalizing convergence where "bare life" – or the "living dead" – become normalized through the consolidation of exception as rule.[24] The elevation of life as central political element (biopolitics) and the topological blurring of inside/outside within the legal order amplify the sovereign's violent action (exception), revealing the operational logic of necropower.

Yet most categories of contemporary political philosophy, constrained by Eurocentric geopolitical epistemologies, failed to recognize colonial politics as the fullest expression of modern sovereign action. Necropolitics, by contrast, seeks to explain how deploying "firearms" to achieve "maximum human destruction" produces "death-worlds" alongside the simultaneous fabrication of the civilized and the just.[25]

The contemporary world is not merely one where exception has become rule – it is the "death-world" of the colonies. Yet we inhabit a reality where zones of conflict and death, produced by the war against the Other, proliferate colonial-model power ("becoming-black").[26] "The colonized world is a world cut in two. The dividing line, the frontier, is marked by barracks and police stations."[27] Coupled with life's disposability in spaces where exception reigns, today's world operates through fragmentation – mass confinement, control, and surveillance of entire populations whose existences await existential and biological processing in service of capital's economic and social project.

[22] Mbembe, *Necropolítica*, pp. 10–11. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]
[23] Mbembe, *Necropolítica*, pp. 32–33. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]
[24] Agamben, *Estado de exceção*.
[25] Mbembe, *Necropolítica*, p. 71. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]
[26] Achille Mbembe identifies a planetary expansion of death politics to bodies beyond those historically targeted by colonial power: "If, amidst this storm, the Black person indeed survives those who invented them, and if – through one of history's guarded reversals – all subaltern humanity were to effectively become Black, what risks would such a *becoming-black of the world* pose to the promise of freedom and universal equality for which the term 'Black' was a prominent feature throughout the modern era? (...) So it was yesterday, so it remains today – even as capitalism recolonizes its own center, and the prospects of a *becoming-black of the world* grow ever more palpable." (Mbembe. *A crítica da razão negra*, pp. 22 and 309, *emphasis added*).
[27] Fanon, *Os condenados da terra*, p. 34. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]

From total extraction to the politics of death

In an era defined by the globalization of economic, social, and political paradigms, we witness the aggressive demarcation of borders as a hallmark of liberal democracies and rule-of-law states – a process that fuels extreme inequalities and excessive violence. These boundaries are enforced through spatial compartmentalization, whether via military/policing operations or bureaucratic/technological control mechanisms. "This is the world of raw extraction."[28] A multiplicity of jurisdictions, territorialities, rights, obligations, social bonds, religions, power centers, political entities, and cultural modes now operate with full efficacy – regardless of their divisive or unifying elements – through the imposition of borders against the Other.

To enforce the planetary and territorial divide, strategies of life precarization and surplus population production are systematically deployed. The governmental technology of extraction – of wealth, goods, and bodies – constitutes the modern framework through which capital organized and proliferated via the colonial model. This world of planetary exhaustion and extractive plunder – where all that ceases to generate profit becomes disposable – is the "world of hunting, capturing, harvesting, selling and buying". Here, "racial capitalism operates as a vast necropolis".[29]

The old – and still operative – modern world expanded its so-called "civilization" solely through the objectification of the Other's existence: a dissimilar being, a sign of difference and negation. Only the West, as it is claimed, could build a society of nations where rights form the organizing axis and individual humanity define the human species. "The Rest (...) embodied the quintessence of objectified existence."[30] This "Other" materialized a humanity suspended between becoming-human and becoming-animal. Thus, colonial extraction operated as "a fundamentally 'civilizing' and 'humanitarian' project, whose violent corollary was merely moral".[31] Here emerges modernity's racial objectification: the black body, extracted from Africa's diverse territories, whose very existence threatened "civilization" and "from which one must seek protection, dismantle, or simply destroy when total control proves impossible".[32]

By focusing on the notions of "bare life" and the "living dead," we can identify fundamental aspects of Mbembe's and Agamben's thought. Their approaches to sacrifice within a politics of death reveal important parallels, even as the philosophers follow distinct theoretical paths. Agamben sharply distinguishes political death from sacrificial killing, while Mbembe maintains a more ambiguous position.

The *homo sacer*, a concept rooted in archaic Roman law, represents the figure that first incorporates human life into its framework. Their killing is permitted through the suspension of the act's illegality, making the killer immune to punishment. However, the one who can be killed without the act being constituted as homicide cannot be executed through legal procedures. The power of this sacred figure lies in its unsacrificeable nature and the impunity surrounding its death.[33] Just as the figure of the sovereign applies the

[28] Mbembe, *Crítica da razão negra*, p. 240. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]
[29] Mbembe, *Crítica da razão negra*, p. 240. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]
[30] Mbembe, *Crítica da razão negra*, p. 29. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]
[31] Mbembe, *Crítica da razão negra*, p. 31. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]
[32] Mbembe, *Crítica da razão negra*, p. 27. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]
[33] Agamben, *Homo sacer*, p. 90. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]

state of exception through law, or by withdrawing it from the legal order, so too does the *homo sacer* relate to the sacred through his unsacrificeable condition and to the social through his killability. As a "living pledge of subjection to death-power",[34] the *homo sacer* resembles Mbembe's "living dead", yet the Italian philosopher insists on the unsacrificeable nature of this death.

For Mbembe, sacrifice appears ambiguous within necropolitics. The African philosopher suggests an economic imperative underlies death policies. Yet in deaths caused by destruction and massacre, there remains an element of waste – the sense of "sacrificing" these disposable lives to preserve those deemed hierarchically superior. This would not be the sacrifice of magical rites or voluntary offerings to the sacred.[35] Rather, it is a disqualified sacrifice, for "death marks the point where destruction, suppression, and sacrifice constitute an irreversible, radical expenditure – without reservation".[36]

It is within this context that Achille Mbembe explains the genesis of "death-worlds", where "entire populations become the sovereign's target".[37] Life, in its disposable condition, is neither understood as a crime nor as a sacrifice when it comes to death, but rather its existence becomes oriented toward the struggle for survival. For these populations, the sovereign is not the power guaranteeing the autonomy of the subject and society; instead, it constitutes the "*nomos* of the political space in which we still live".[38]

The dehumanization of the unfigurable

Achille Mbembe distances himself from traditional modern conceptions of sovereignty by analyzing its operation not only through the state and its institutions, but also through other dimensions that require no legal order to function. Simultaneously, through supranational institutions, sovereign power engages in constant interaction with other similarly structured powers. Within liberal frameworks, politics is circumscribed by the realization of individual autonomy through collective projects of communication and recognition.[39] However, as Paul Gilroy asserts: "Be no reciprocity on the plantation outside of the possibilities of rebellion and suicide, flight and silent mourning, and there is certainly no grammatical unity of speech to mediate communicative reason".[40] Achille Mbembe draws upon reflections from Black North American thought to locate the critique of sovereign power viewed from its hidden face:

> Moreover, if the strength of modern democracies has always stemmed from their capacity to reinvent themselves and constantly invent not only their form but also their idea or conception, this has often come at the cost of dissimulation or concealment of their origins in violence. The history of this simultaneous effort of invention and reinvention, of dissimulation and concealment, is profoundly paradoxical, if not

[34] Agamben, *Homo sacer*, p. 202. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]
[35] To further explore Achille Mbembe's analysis through Georges Bataille's reading of sacrifice and its intersection with Giorgio Agamben's bare life, see Eugene Brennan's article *Necropolitics and Surplus Life: Mbembe and Beyond*.
[36] Mbembe, *Necropolítica*, p. 14. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]
[37] Mbembe, *Crítica da razão negra*, p. 48. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]
[38] Mbembe, *Necropolítica*, p. 11. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]
[39] Habermas, *The theory of communicative action*.
[40] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, p. 57.

> chaotic. In all cases, it demonstrates the extent to which the democratic order, in the diversity of its trajectories, is notoriously equivocal.[41]

The violent course of social life in the modern era manifests a destructive and terrorizing form for the "living dead" who, in other words, signifies the withdrawal of humanity from the "Other" that modernity imagined as without representation or as something, but not someone. Treated as refuse, Black people and Africa – alongside Indigenous peoples of the Americas, Asia, and Oceania – were reconfigured as images of objectified existence: vegetative or mineral life, stripped of agency.[42] This surplus population was "fundamentally unfigurable," with "the Black person in particular becoming the consummate example of this Other-being, vigorously forged through void".[43]

The "void" – as legitimating act of modern violence – relied fundamentally on stripping the Other (the "dissimilar" uncivilized being) of human character. "The Black person embodies, as previously stated, natural man – wild and untamed."[44] While this paper does not examine European philosophy's decisive role in producing the universal subject, we emphasize how this very fabrication actively engineered the erasure of recognition and representation for Others – those non-European, non-white, non-male – within the conceptual and practical foundations of sovereign power and liberal democracy.

Thus, the void emerges as the demarcation of the Black body – an object invented by Europe and fixed within Western culture as a figure devoid of human meaning or subjectivity. Such fixation operated through a series of ways of seeing, of imaging, of normalizing spaces, gestures, actions, and sociabilities.[45] The Black figure – this colonialist invention – embodies the conflict of an existence marked by absolute precarity and non-being, constituting a life where the image of death superimposes itself, "lending the rigidity of a corpse".[46]

In a form of "primordial degradation", the void represents the absence of humanity in an inconsistent human being. In the world shaped by transformations in colonial power between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this void was neither repudiated nor revised by abolitionist movements or anti-slavery rulings. Neocolonialism needed to somehow fill this ontological emptiness with a signifier that permitted a semblance of human presence while preserving precarity. This involved inscribing the subaltern being into a distinct order – one that allowed their existence as a separate entity requiring correction and behavioral governance.[47] This reconfigured domination manifests in

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[41] Mbembe, *Políticas da inimizade*, p. 35. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]

[42] According to Achille Mbembe: "The noun 'Black' is... the name given to the product resulting from the process through which people of African origin were transformed into living *mineral* – matter from which metal is extracted". Mbembe, *Crítica da razão negra*, p. 82.

[43] Mbembe, *Crítica da razão negra*, p. 30. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]

[44] Hegel, *Filosofia da história*, p. 84. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]

For a deeper engagement with Mbembe's analysis of Hegel's role in constructing the universal subject through opposition to the Other, see *Critique of Black Reason* (Chapter 1: "The Subject of Race"). To examine the philosophical production of the modern subject as predicated on the negation of vast human populations, refer to Denise Ferreira da Silva's rigorous study *Toward a Global Idea of Race*.

[45] Fanon, *Pele negra, máscaras brancas.* [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]

[46] Mbembe, *Crítica da razão negra*, p. 96. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]

[47] Each historical and social context renews colonial power through unique political experiences. In Brazil, the "myth of racial democracy" operates as a governmental device controlling Black and marginalized populations while perpetuating social control and dehumanization. For deeper

philosophical debates about states of exception and camps, enabling liberal democratic administrators to wield violence within a structured framework.

One could argue that one of the most distinctive features of colonial power and necropolitics is the effective combination of biopower, the state of exception, and the production of enemies. "Race was the emergency explanation of human beings whom no European or civilized man could undestand... This answer resulted in the most terrible massacres in recent history."[48] Thus, it can be said that race is the element that solidifies this connection and synthesizes the politics of massacre linked to bureaucracy – the supreme form of materialization of Western rationality.

Biopower and the critique of "letting die"

A problematic result of Western rationality is the troubled relationship between reason and terror. Through the bureaucratization of terror came the brutalization of enslaved Black people. The manufacturing of terror not only maintained but increased sovereign power through necropolitics, via a series of social and economic practices and government technologies grounded in the control and use of bodies and life.

Achille Mbembe draws on Michel Foucault's thesis about how bodies, whether individual or the collective body of a population, become the essential political reality and the means through which power relations are enacted. In his 1976 Collège de France course titled *Society Must Be Defended*, Foucault developed a comprehensive program building on his work from the first half of the 1970s concerning the operational modes of power mechanisms and techniques. In this work, the French philosopher's hypothesis is that war is the organizing element and "historical principle" behind the constitution of sovereign power and modern states. To develop this formulation, Foucault traced a genealogy of the "race problem" from seventeenth-century European conflicts to Nazi concentration camps and fascist regimes in his final lecture (March 17, 1976). He posits: "It was through racial binarism that the West first conceived political power as war".[49]

The implication of thinking the "war of races" through the logic of the sub-race is that it produces the dehumanization of the Other and, consequently, amplifies the perceived threat that the Other race poses not only to social forms and practices but to the very condition of life and biological existence of the superior race. Thus are laid the warlike foundations of biopolitics. The State replaces the archaic sovereign right "to make die" with another right, the power "to make live and to let die".[50]

Yet, from the definition of biopolitics' emergence remains the pressing question: "How can such a power kill, if it is essentially about increasing life?" Foucault's answer is that "it was at this moment that racism inserted itself as the fundamental mechanism of power",[51] becoming the legitimizing discourse of what would be the exception to the rule of "making live", without, however, being marginal in the governance of populations.

conceptual and historical engagement with these themes, see the essential essay collection by thinker Beatriz Nascimento, *O negro visto por ele mesmo* [*TN: The Negro Seen by Himself*].

[48] Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarism*, p. 185.

[49] Foucault, *Em defesa da sociedade*, p. 26. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]

[50] Foucault, *Em defesa da sociedade*, p. 287. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]

[51] Foucault, *Em defesa da sociedade*, p. 304. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]

For Foucault, racism performs two functions: firstly, to promote the split between those who must live and those who must die; secondly, to introduce the warlike mechanism into the racial question, for the more one kills the Other, the more one ensures the life and vigor of society. Therefore, it is a matter of categorizing those who place life at risk and authorizing war against them.

By dividing people into living and dead, a biological relation of power is established. "This is what Foucault labels with the (seemingly familiar) term 'racism'."[52] The phrase "seemingly familiar" signals Mbembe's critique of the theoretical limits in Foucault's framework. Is "this notion of biopower sufficient to account for contemporary forms where politics, through war, resistance, or counterterrorism, makes the killing of the enemy its absolute and primary objective?"[53]

Some European philosophers, such as Foucault and Arendt, link the ultimate expression of racism to the Nazi experience and concentration camps, thereby arguing the connection between war and politics. Yet, neither they nor Agamben connected the emergence of the modern States' war terror with the political and social economy of the colonies. For Mbembe, "the notion of biopower is insufficient to explain contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death".[54] These colonized and extractive territories are the sites where all political-juridical order, governing technologies, and bureaucracies serve a politics of death and reification of entire populations.

Conclusion

In a historical moment of unprecedented challenges, with the colonial extractivist model elevated to planetary scale by globalized capitalism, state responses, those of large corporations, as well as social practices and regional conflicts, have reinforced borders and deepened segregation of human beings. The twentieth century reactivated, through neoliberal politics, the specters of racism and politics of death, whether directly through fascist and far-right impulses, or through the hidden face of rule-of-law states. It is as if liberal democracy could only exist at the expense of excluding the racialized and superfluous human being, the "unrepresentable" figure that fuels the manufacture of the enemy and, consequently, the unleashing of exception and war.

The works and articles of Achille Mbembe offer invaluable contributions to understanding contemporary politics and its structures and devices for unleashing violence. His trajectory, as we have seen, moves through certain strands of contemporary political philosophy, yet his reading of the philosophers he dialog with is undertaken from a standpoint both internal and external to the theoretical field in question. Thinkers and thoughts from European philosophy, contrasted and combined with African, Afro-American, and Middle Eastern thinkers, converge in Mbembe's own "originating experience".[55]

[52] Mbembe, *Necropolítica*, p. 17. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]
[53] Mbembe, *Necropolítica*, p. 6. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]
[54] Mbembe, *Necropolítica*, p. 71. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]
[55] According to Achille Mbembe, "this is, therefore, another strand of black reason – in which writing seeks to conjure the demon of the first text and the structure of subjection it carries; in which the very act of writing strives to evoke, save, activate, and reactualize the originating experience (the

Experience, as an originating element, does not configure as an essence or starting point that would give depth to his thought. Rather, it is a meeting of ideas "like a river with multiple tributaries", while the global political context invites philosophy (and other forms of critical thought) to turn its gaze to other sites beyond what had until then been "the center of gravity of the world": Europe. This opening of critical perspective is, for Mbembe, "the fundamental experience of our time".[56]

The critique of modern thought from the experience of colonial power and its politics of death constitutes the author's political, academic, and intellectual field, becoming a central element for the emergence of a significant reception of his thought. Mbembe shows how colonial power configures itself as the genesis of violence in contemporary politics: the apex of racialized politics. His philosophy updates the forms of colonial power in the experience of the Palestinian territories as controlled, segregated, and bureaucratized spaces where state and military violence operate under the sign of exception, and the Palestinian population exists as "the living dead".

As the publication of Giorgio Agamben's *Homo sacer* marks its 30th anniversary, it is significant to note the influence and productivity of his thought on an author who has appropriated Agambenian concepts as intellectual tools, crafting an important concept for critical production in political philosophy, as well as for understanding social resistance practices and overcoming politics of death.

tradition) and to rediscover the truth about itself, no longer outside itself, but from its own ground". Mbembe, *Crítica da razão negra*, p. 65. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]

[56] Mbembe, *Crítica da razão negra*, p. 11. [TN: Free English translation of the Portuguese quotes.]

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Edson Teles
Professor of Philosophy in the Department of Philosophy and the Graduate Program in Philosophy at the Federal University of São Paulo (Unifesp). Researcher at the Center for Forensic Anthropology and Archaeology (CAAF/Unifesp). *E-mail*: edson.teles@unifesp.br.