

## Book Review: Necro-politics by Achille Mbembe

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**Achille Mbembe, *Necro-politics*. Durham. Duke University Press, 2019. viii + 213 pages. Paperback, \$25.95.**

*Necro-politics* by Achille Mbembe is a work that combines theory, politics, and race. It provides the reader with an opportunity to dive through a depth of knowledge of political, social, and postcolonial theory. Mbembe begins *Necro-politics* with a short introduction, “The Ordeal of The World,” that presents his scholar advocacy borderless writing style, without control points, but with a wealth of knowledge.

*Necro-politics* is divided into eight sections, six chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion. These sections provide insight into what Mbembe refers to as the dark side of democracy, political violence, post-colonialism, and the history of decolonization. Mbembe’s approaches to each section vary throughout the book. The author makes use of Frantz Fanon’s political and psychiatric work to form his arguments on war as the religion of today and to question the transformation of politics into business, which he theorizes runs the risk of eliminating the possibility of politics.

In chapter one, “Exit from Democracy,” Mbembe begins by stating his aim to contribute from Africa, where he is from, resides, and writes. This chapter introduces his idea of “The Nocturnal Body of Democracy” or the dark side of democracy, which is based on the same fears, desires, and violence that fueled colonialism. Mbembe touches on what he describes as the ideal life in a democracy, which is peaceful and violence-free, but notes the violence of democracies—its necropolitical principle—has been metaphorically “swept under the rug” (p16). The author notes how the United States began with a pro-slavery democracy and now projects ideas of peace in the West which is dependent upon inflicting violence elsewhere. It institutionalizes a pattern of inequality on a global scale to fulfill our desires of today, transformed from yesterday’s colonialism. Towards the chapter’s end Mbembe touches on terror and counterterror as being “a

relation without desire” (p33). Racism, the main driver behind the necropolitical principle, creates a toxic cycle of being a victim to executioner then back to being the victim.

In “The Society of Enmity” Mbembe continues with a critique of the tactic of separation found in societies throughout history. It’s first section “The Terrifying Object” focuses on the United States’ desire for an enemy, an enemy we objectify, e.g., foreigners, refugees, Arabs, all intruders. Mbembe reminds us of South Africa’s apartheid, the Palestine and Israeli conflict, and mass incarceration, all of which he describes as tactics of separation. Mbembe continues the chapter with “State of Insecurity” how the structure of the security state propagates fear rhetoric, which he compares to demand and surplus of an economy, fear is created for consumers. Similarly, in “Nanoracism,” Mbembe emphasizes the ways in which racism is a consumable product.

In chapter three, “Necropolitics”, Mbembe utilizes Michel Foucault’s concept of biopower, which suggests the ultimate expression of authority is in the power to decide who lives and who dies. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s discussions on the relation between “becoming subject” and death follows. Hegel argues that humans truly becomes a “subject” or separates himself from the animal in his struggle and work through which death is confronted. He explores Bataille’s discussion of the relationship between death, political, sovereignty, and the subject. Mbembe pulls on these concepts to argue that the present-day ways to subdue life to the power of death, which is what Mbembe refers to as Necropolitics are strongly reshaping the relationships between terror, sacrifice, and resistance.

In the following chapter, “Viscerality” Mbembe refers to our current time as “planetary entanglement” (93). The world now has a combination of fast capitalism, soft-power warfare,

and an accelerated speed and intensification of connections through digital technologies. He ends the chapter with his concern about the erasure of the political by capital.

In the fifth chapter, “Fanon’s Pharmacy” Mbembe draws from Frantz Fanon’s theory of radical decolonization to tackle tensions between theories such as the principle of destruction and the principle of life. Mbembe utilizes Fanon’s arguments of cultural, systemic, and anti-Negro racism, which are prevalent today with the public killing of Black people by police officers and the racist comments and statements by the U.S. president. Mbembe explores Fanon’s idea of care as a shared vulnerability. To tour new understandings of the human, that may go beyond humanism.

In chapter six, “This Stifling Noonday,” Mbembe continues with critiques of liberalism and argues that racial pessimism stems from liberalism. He touches on Afropessimist and Afrofuturist which is a literary, cultural, and aesthetic movement that emerged during the second half of the twentieth century. In “Ethics of the Passerby,” Mbembe closes with a critique of Europe as the center of democracy and questions what is freedom if one cannot break from this accident of being born somewhere. He ends with Fanon’s final prayer “O my body, always make me a man who questions.”

*Necro-politics* would be a relevant supplementary text for graduate courses in theory political sociology and international relations. Mbembe theorizes about the origins of the contemporary world while highlighting the increase in militarization, inequality, and the revival of racism and fascist forces. Following the reading of different chapters in the text, graduate students could be instructed to apply critical or classical theories to contemporary social problems, similar to Mbembe, and then be asked to help facilitate problem-solving exercises. Such an exercise could create a perspective that students could use as a life skill and academic

professional edge. In addition, the insights provided in the book through theories, critiques, and histories serve to deepen the understanding students have about democracy, war, and race.

While this book is extremely well written, at times it is a bit difficult to understand. To the uninitiated concepts like biopower, sovereignty, and the state of siege can be confusing. However, this is also an opportunity to be introduced to new ideas and theorists that can unquestionably widen the reader's perspective and knowledge on decolonization and critiques of democracy. The messages within the book are insightful and intriguing. The book provides the reader with fundamental perspectives on race, that align with common critiques of democracy and Foucault's concept of biopower while drawing on Fanon's work.

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