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# **The Pandemic Democratizes the Power to Kill: An Interview with Achille Mbembe**

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The coronavirus is changing the form in which we think about the human body. It was converted into a weapon, says Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe. After all, in exiting our homes we might contract the virus or transmit it to others. There are already more than 783,000 confirmed cases and 37,000 deaths in the world. “Now we all have the power to kill...isolation is just one form of regulating this power,” says Mbembe.

62 year-old Mbembe coined the term “necropolitics” in 2003. In his work, Mbembe investigates the form in which governments decide who will live and who will die, and also how they will live and die. He teaches at the *University of Witwatersrand* in Johannesburg. Last Friday (March 27<sup>th</sup>), South Africa confirmed its first coronavirus deaths.

Necropolitics also appears in the fact that the virus does not affect everyone equally. There exists a debate concerning prioritizing treatment for the youth and allowing the elderly to die. There are people like the president of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, who insist that the economy cannot be stopped even if it means that some of the population must die in order to guarantee productivity. “Will some die? They will die. I’m sorry, that’s life,” said the Brazilian president.

“The capitalist system is based on the unequal distribution of the opportunity to live and die...this logic of sacrifice has always been at the heart of neoliberalism, and it should be called necroliberalism. This system has always functioned with the idea that some are more valuable than others. Those of no value are expendable,” explains Mbembe.

## **What are your first impressions of this pandemic?**

For now, I’m overwhelmed by the magnitude of this calamity. The coronavirus is truly a calamity and it brings us a series of uncomfortable questions. This is a virus that affects our capacity to breathe.

**And it forces governments and hospitals to decide who will continue breathing.**

Yes. The question is how to find a way to ensure that every individual will be able to breathe. This should be our political priority. I also think that our fear of isolation in quarantine is related to the fear of confronting our own finitude. This fear has to do with the problem of delegating our own death to others.

### **Does social isolation grant us some power over death?**

Yes, a relative power. We can escape death or postpone it. Containing death is at the heart of these contentious politics. This is a power, but it's not an absolute power because it depends on other people.

### **Does isolation also depend on others?**

Yes. Another thing is that many people who have died have not had time to say goodbye. Many were immediately cremated or buried without delay, as if they were trash to be dispensed of at the soonest opportunity. This logic of elimination occurs precisely at a moment in which at least in theory, we need our community...and there is no community without being able to say farewell to the departed and without the organizing of funerals. The question is: how to create communities in times of calamity?

### **What consequences will the pandemic have for society?**

The pandemic will change the form in which we relate to our own bodies. Our body has been converted into a threat to our very selves. The second consequence is the transformation of the form in which we think about the future, our consciousness of time. Suddenly, we know not how tomorrow will be.

### **Our body is also a threat for others if we do not stay at home.**

Yes. Now we all have the power to kill. The power to kill has been completely democratized. Isolation is precisely a form of regulating this power.

### **Another debate that evokes necropolitics is the question of what at this point should be the priority of politics, to save the economy or to save the population. The Brazilian government has signaled that the priority should be the preservation of the economy.**

This is the logic of sacrifice that has always been at the heart of neoliberalism, and it should be called necroliberalism. This system has always functioned with a calculating apparatus, the idea being that some people are more valuable than others. Those of no value are expendable. The question is of what to do with those we have decided are worth nothing. This question, of course, always impacts the same races, the same social classes, and the same genders.

### **Like the HIV epidemic, in which governments delayed action because the victims were at the margins...blacks, homosexuals, drug users?**

In theory, the coronavirus can kill everyone. Everyone is threatened. But it's one thing to be confined to a suburb in a second residence in a rural area. It's another thing to be on the front lines working at a medical

facility without a mask. Today there are degrees of how risks are distributed.

**Various presidents have referred to the battle against the coronavirus as a war. Does the choice of words matter at this moment? You wrote in your work that war is a clear exercise in necropolitics.**

It's difficult to give a name to what is happening in the world. It's not only a virus. Not knowing what is to come is what makes states all over the world resurrect the old terminology utilized in war. Furthermore, people are retreating behind the borders of their own nation states.

**Is there a rise in nationalism during this pandemic?**

Yes, people are returning to "chez-soi," as is said in French. To their homes. As if the worst thing that could happen in life would be to die outside of one's home. The borders are being closed. I'm not saying that they should be open, but governments are responding to this pandemic with nationalist gestures, with images of the border, of the wall.

**After this crisis, will we be the same as before?**

The next time we'll be hit even harder than during this pandemic. Humanity itself is in question. What this pandemic reveals, if we take it seriously, is that our history on earth is not guaranteed. There is no guarantee that we'll be here forever. The fact that it's plausible that life will continue without us is the key theme of this century.

*Translation from the Spanish by Thomas Marchevsky.*

**Bio:**

**Achille Mbembe**, born in Cameroon, obtained his Ph.D in History at the Sorbonne in Paris in 1989 and a D.E.A. in Political Science at the Institut d'Etudes Politiques (Paris). He was Assistant Professor of History at Columbia University, New York (1988-1991), a Senior Research Fellow at the Brookings Institute in Washington, D.C. (1991-1992), Associate Professor of History at the University of Pennsylvania (1992-1996), Executive Secretary of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) in Dakar, Senegal (1996-2000). He was also a Visiting Professor at the University of California, Berkeley (2001), at Yale University (2003), at the University of California at Irvine (2004-2005), at Duke University (2006-2011) and at Harvard University (2012).

He is the recipient of an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Paris VIII (France) and Université Catholique de Louvain (Belgium). He has also held the Albert the Great Chair at the University of Koln (2019) and was an Honorary Professor at the Jakob Fugger-Zentrum, University of Augsburg (Germany). He has been awarded numerous awards including the 2015 Geswichter Scholl-Preis, the 2018 Gerda Henkel Award and the 2018 Ernst Bloch Award.

A co-founder of Les Ateliers de la pensée de Dakar and a major figure in the emergence of a new wave of French critical theory, he has written extensively on contemporary politics and philosophy, including *On the*

*Postcolony* (University of California Press, 2001), *Critique of Black Reason* (Duke University Press, 2016), *Necropolitics* (Duke University Press, 2019) and *Out of the Dark Night. Essays on Decolonization* (Columbia University Press, 2020). Originally written in French, his books and numerous articles are translated in thirteen languages (English, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Dutch, Polish, Slovenian, Danish, Swedish, Romanian, Arabic, Chinese). He has an A1 rating from the South African National Research Foundation and is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.