

*Focus of the Issue:*

INTELLECTUAL TRENDS  
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*Research article*

**MBEMBE'S NECROPOLITICS:  
THE NATURE AND INTRINSIC PROBLEMS  
OF THE POSTCOLONIAL SOVEREIGNTY**

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**Abstract.** This paper explores the concept of necropolitics, developed by leading African political philosopher Achille Mbembe, within the context of decolonization and sovereignty in African states. The paper critically analyzes this concept through its relationship to the classical Hobbesian paradigm of sovereignty and the intellectual genealogy of the concept of biopolitics. The authors identify theoretical lacunae in the universalist model of the social contract, demonstrating its limitations in explaining the structures of violence and exclusion that emerged in the colonial and postcolonial eras. This theoretical reconstruction reveals the content of the concept of necropolitics, defined as a form of sovereign power based on racial hierarchization and the right to determine who lives and who dies. The paper analyzes its key components: the spatial organization of “death worlds,” the status of the “living dead,” the discursive practices of “little death,” and the aesthetic dimension of “brutality.” The main result of the study is the development of a theoretical and methodological framework for analysis, structured around six interrelated parameters (bonds of enmity, the world of death, the little death, racial hierarchization, the mortification of the collective body, and brutality). This methodological apparatus provides a toolkit for analyzing the structures of political violence and allows for a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of political violence, moving beyond traditional Eurocentric approaches. The work contributes to the development of a postcolonial (or decolonial) perspective in political theory and offers a relevant analytical tool for rethinking the dichotomy of violence and security. The necropolitical framework of analysis has the potential to be applied both to the study of African political reality and to the assessment of processes in other regions of the world, consistent with A. Mbembe’s thesis on the “Africanization” of the modern world.

**Keywords:** Achille Mbembe, necropolitics, decolonization, sovereignty, biopolitics, Thomas Hobbes, political violence, colonialism, post-colonial studies, racism

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## INTRODUCTION

Sovereignty remains one of the most fundamental concepts in political science. Genealogically, this notion traces back to the conceptual model provided by 17th-century English political philosopher Thomas Hobbes, who presented one of the first systematic interpretations of sovereign power in Modernity. According to Hobbes, sovereign power emerges as a result of the delegation of rights and resources ceded to a single authorized body by “every single individual.” In other words, sovereignty is established rather than imposed or transferred; it affects everyone, not just some people. [Hobbes 1651].

Hobbes views sovereignty as the result of a tacit compromise by each member of a unified anthropomorphic political body to relinquish the individual right to use force in favor of a single unified center. The functional component of the act of establishing sovereignty boils down to increasing the level of security for the inhabitants of a given territory, which creates the basis for the legitimacy of the “terms” of the social contract [Shmitt: 124–144].

It is noteworthy that, unlike the overwhelming majority of his contemporaries during the era of active European colonization of the Americas, Thomas Hobbes is difficult to accuse of racism. The English philosopher sees no fundamental, anthropologically predetermined essential difference between the people entering into the social contract, whether they be Europeans, Native Americans, Africans, or anyone else [Sreedhar 2023]. This universalist suggestion led to a significant gap in his theory. Thomas Hobbes's social contract leaves out the situation of the violent inclusion or exclusion of entire population groups from intersubjective contractual relations regarding sovereign rights.

The colonial practices of the 17th century, contemporary to Hobbes, had already revealed certain limitations of his theory. The question of whether the social contract extends to the indigenous populations of the colonies remained outside the conceptual framework of the theory, as did the phenomenon of the right to violence exercised by private actors, such as the East India Companies, which, possessing the attributes of sovereign power, eroded the rigid hierarchy of the Leviathan state.

In part, such contradictions can be explained by the definition of epistemological violence developed in the works of the American philosopher G. Spivak. This term refers to the exclusion of the subalterns (oppressed and subordinate groups of the population) from the process of forming the discursive space. Various oppressed groups are fundamentally denied and repeatedly rejected the institutional opportunity to participate

in the shaping of the system of knowledge *per se*, as a result of which they are, as it were, “forgotten” [Spivak 2003].

In this context, Eurocentric political theories that claim to be universal often ignore other historical and cultural experiences, thereby reproducing the logic of colonial domination. As the Argentine semiotician V. Mignolo notes, the Western rationality of Modernity is imposed as universal “colonial knowledge,” marginalizing alternative ways of understanding the world [Mignolo 2013]. Among the concepts whose universality can be called into question is the classical Hobbesian approach to sovereignty.

This theoretical gap becomes particularly evident when analyzing African statehood, which took shape under conditions of colonial subjugation and forced integration into the alien political model of Western *sovereignty*. It is entirely natural that the structural nexus of violence and security in African states, due to the historical context, exhibits significant differences compared to the multitude of Western and non-Western models of sovereignty [Loshkariov 2024].

Nevertheless, sovereignty as a deliberate policy to achieve political independence, as well as economic and cultural self-sufficiency, remains among the policy priorities of many African states [Degtrev 2024]. It is also inextricably linked with the desire for decolonization, since it is antagonistic to the system of dependence on an external actor.

In this regard, a certain contradiction arises: decolonization is understood as the attainment of a certain level of a political category (and the practices behind it) introduced from outside. Such structural duality can lead to a reevaluation of sovereignty at the level of state policy. Prominent examples of the search for alternatives include Muammar Gaddafi’s (1942–2011) Libyan Jamahiriya (1977–2013) and the modern Confederation of Sahel States (since 2024).

In accordance with Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi’s “Third Universal Theory,” Libya sought to establish a non-partisan system of direct democracy through the institutions of people’s committees and people’s congresses. The Confederation of Sahel States, on the other hand, is a regional organization whose ultimate goal is to achieve sovereignty through the integration of the military and economic spheres while maintaining significant political autonomy for its three member states. Both projects faced serious structural challenges, including within the framework of the aforementioned epistemological hybridization of the concept of sovereignty. To achieve this externally introduced concept, these policies draw on the experience of pre-colonial political practices (self-governance of ethno-genealogical Libyan groups and “soft” imperial organization of space in the Sahel (8th–19th centuries), respectively).

Furthermore, African political reality is often reduced to a combination of formal state sovereignty with a high degree of its *de facto* absence, where central authority fails to provide basic security and control over the territory. The continent faces a growing complex of problems: from interethnic conflicts and terrorism to the existence of vast “frontier” zones free from state influence. Often, the tools used to explain African conflicts implicitly rely on the formal concept of sovereignty within Eurocentric conceptual models, which can significantly diminish the heuristic potential of existing methods and methodologies.

In light of these contradictions, there is an urgent need for a critical dialogue between classical European political thought and the intellectual explorations of African scholars.

The work of Achille Mbembe, one of the most influential philosophers in contemporary Africa, makes a significant contribution to such a dialogue. His concept of necropolitics offers a more nuanced understanding of sovereignty, revealing its deep connections to violence and exclusion, and demonstrates a more comprehensive view of the entire network of mechanisms responsible for the realization of the violence–security nexus.

### THE PLACE OF THE NECROPOLITICS IN THE SYSTEM OF THOUGHT OF ACHILLE MBEMBE

The concept of “necropolitics,” developed by A. Mbembe, gained the most prominence. It was first outlined in the essay of the same name, “Necropolitics,” published in the journal *Public Culture* in 2003 [Mbembe 2003].

In October 2019, Mbembe published the book “Necropolitics”, in which he further developed the concept and formulated a comprehensive theory of necropolitics. The book consists of six independent essays, including the eponymous work published in 2003. Each essay examines one aspect of the global process of creating artificial borders and lines of division between people. This process is studied in its inseparable connection with colonialism and racism [Mbembe 2019].

Early in his intellectual career, Mbembe focused on the history of colonialism in Africa in general and in Cameroon in particular, as well as on its consequences for the post-colonial world. At the current stage of his work, Mbembe does not limit himself to African issues but uses his concepts to examine contemporary forms of political power as a universal phenomenon. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that Mbembe’s ideas were formulated on the basis of an analysis of the colonial past of African states.

Mbembe’s concept has proven to be in high demand within the academic community. At the time of writing this paper, “Necropolitics” (2019) had been cited more than 17,000 times<sup>1</sup>. The concept of necropolitics has made Mbembe one of the most cited and translated African authors and an influential political philosopher at a global scale [Coates 2024: 140–143]. For the author himself, the timeliness of his ideas lies in what he calls *devenir-nègre*, or the Africanization of the entire world. This means that the violence, alienation, and artificial creation of borders, which Africa and Africans have fully experienced and continue to experience, are beginning to engulf the entire world, including Western states [Mbembe 2017; Mbembe 2019: 1–9].

In the current phase of his work, beginning in 2017, the political theorist examines the reproduction of patterns of colonial power in the postcolonial era. As an African and a historian of Africa, Mbembe observes a widespread repetition today of the experience of the colonization of Africa and the so-called “Black Atlantic.” In 2020, the work “Brutalism” was published in French, where this idea was further developed. As shown in the publication, divisions and structural violence around the world have come to manifest in crude material and bodily forms, with the line between machine and living matter blurring gradually [Mbembe 2024: 9–26].

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<sup>1</sup> Citation statistics for “Necropolitics” (2019). *Google Scholar*. [https://scholar.google.com/citations?view\\_op=view\\_citation&hl=ru&user=1i7hKfQAAAAJ&citation\\_for\\_view=1i7hKfQAAAAJ:hMod-77fHWUC](https://scholar.google.com/citations?view_op=view_citation&hl=ru&user=1i7hKfQAAAAJ&citation_for_view=1i7hKfQAAAAJ:hMod-77fHWUC) (accessed: 01.08.2026)

In criticizing Modernity and its political manifestations, A. Mbembe proposes a vision for a just social order. To come *out from the dark night*, decolonization is necessary; through it, the Earth will become the *common* heritage of every individual, where each person will form an integral part of a unified community. The political philosopher draws on the idea of the Martinican author Édouard Glissant regarding planetary universality (“*le Tout-Monde*”), speaking of a world in which borders as such do not exist. The full unfolding of the world presupposes the universal interconnectedness of all people and the absence of any distinctions between them [Mbembe 2021a: 7–41]. Colonialism and necropolitics, in turn, by definition entail the exact opposite, namely the division of people into racial categories.

Coming *out of the dark night* implies not only a human rhizome (that is, the interconnected coexistence of a multitude in the absence of a single center and hierarchy, where everyone is accessible to everyone else) but also rhizomatic relations between all forms of the living and non-living in principle [Mbembe 2021b]. Mbembe’s planetary universality thus constitutes an ecological and humanistic utopia.

In Mbembe’s worldview, the core of the political and social reality is the phenomenon of power as the ability *to divide*. This division is most clearly manifested in racism, which itself involves distinction based on purely biological characteristics. Necropolitics constitutes the exercise of power through the hierarchization of a multitude of people into racial groups [Mbembe 2019: 70–71]. In this regard, it can be assumed that necropolitics lies at the foundation of Mbembe’s entire political-philosophical system.

Necropolitics as a concept links Mbembe’s earlier period of intellectual career (prior to the publication of works containing the idea of *devenir-nègre* in 2017) to his current phase. Furthermore, the concept of necropolitics seeks to answer the researcher’s key questions: how and why does division among people occur? How can this division be overcome?

Mbembe does not provide his own definition of necropolitics. In his 2025 interview, the philosopher distances himself from his own concept and expresses support for the work of other researchers in its further development, leaving ample room for interpretation<sup>2</sup>. In this regard, it seems important to reconstruct the theoretical and methodological framework for the study of necropolitics based on the rich intellectual legacy of this leading African political philosopher.

## NECROPOLITICS AS AN EXTENSION OF BIOPOLITICS

In his study of necropolitics, Mbembe draws on the understanding of sovereignty proposed by the authors of the concept of biopolitics. As a representative of the broader academic school of biopolitical studies, the concept of sovereignty for him extends beyond the organization of power within national and supranational borders.

The French philosopher and post-structuralist Michel Foucault (1926–1984) and the Italian philosopher and essayist Giorgio Agamben have had the greatest influence on

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<sup>2</sup> The 2024 Holberg Conversation: Achille Mbembe. *YouTube*\*. 02.10.2024 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DrWv38rBEjs> (accessed: 08.01.2026) (\* Youtube has been blocked in Russia since 2024 due to its violation of the law of Russian Federation).

Mbembe's interpretation of biopolitics. It is precisely the works of these two thinkers that the African theorist refers to, sharing their critical stance toward sovereignty. In particular, from Michel Foucault's "Discipline and Punish" and his lectures "Society Must be Defended", as well as from Giorgio Agamben's "Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life," Mbembe borrows the understanding of sovereignty as the capacity to dictate who is able to live and who must die. [Mbembe 2019: 66].

In his lectures entitled "Society Must be Defended", M. Foucault uses the term "biopolitics" for the first time and introduces the concept of the "*right of the sword*," which is central to the entire concept. The *right of the sword* means the sovereign's right to take life or let live [Foucault 1997]. M. Foucault goes on to formulate such interrelated concepts as biopolitics and disciplinary power. While the latter concept pertains to power over the individual, biopolitics signifies the minimization of chance through the regulation of the population's life processes [Kobylin 2011: 172–175].

For Foucault, the dichotomy between death and racism is also important. This issue would later develop into necropolitics. On the one hand, the theorist states that death is not the subject of power. On the other hand, death becomes a political phenomenon because of racism. The function of racism consists in the hierarchization of the biological continuum. Racism divides society into those who are worth living and those who are worth dying. In racism, M. Foucault sees a dualism of biological security, where the destruction of *others* leads to the strengthening of one's own group and the assertion of sovereignty [Foucault 1997; Su Rasmussen 2011: 38–41].

Michel Foucault's ideas find their development in the works of Giorgio Agamben. For the Italian philosopher, the biopolitics of sovereign power is not linked to racism. Giorgio Agamben focuses on the paradox of the "included exclusion," in which power is established through exclusion from the norm. No norm can exist without exclusion, since the "normal" requires the presence of the "abnormal," the deviant. Politics begins with the extension of the included exclusion to human life, which is biopolitics. Moreover, the right to life is guaranteed only by the sovereign's ability to revoke that right. Therefore, for G. Agamben, the greatest manifestation of power is concentrated in the figure of *homo sacer*, the person removed from the legal field of the "prohibition on killing." When a state of emergency is declared, every person becomes *sacer*. [Agamben 1998; Norris 2003: 9–11].

The two authors' concepts of biopolitics bear significant similarities. However, their views diverge regarding the temporal and spatial dimensions, as well as the object of biopolitics.

For Foucault, biopolitics is a phenomenon of Modernity, without a clear attachment to territory, where the sovereign manifests itself in various institutions. The entire population becomes the object of biopolitics, the essence of which partly consists in the division into races. Moreover, Foucault does not provide specific parameters for the social construction of race. Mbembe draws attention to this conceptual gap by using the term "race" in a "broad" sense [Mbembe 2019: 71].

The division into races is the starting point for both Michel Foucault's biopolitics and Mbembe's necropolitics. For a deeper understanding of the category of "race" in Mbembe's works, one should turn, first, to the author's earlier works, and second, to the work of the French-speaking West Indian revolutionary philosopher who had a significant influence on his thought, Franz Fanon (1925–1961).

In 2013, Mbembe published “Critique of Black Reason,” a work devoted to the construction of the image of the Black person in colonial discourse. Unlike Fanon, who used the neutral term “blackness” (“*le Noir*”) to denote racial stereotypes, A. Mbembe turns to the term “*le Nègre*,” which in modern French carries the connotation of a racial slur. It is precisely this word that the author frequently uses to denote the totality of manifestations of power in relation to Africans and the “Black Atlantic.” Thus, it is precisely “*le Nègre*” that is used to describe the experience of the colonization of Africa in “*Necropolitics*” (2019). Furthermore, Mbembe fears that the entire world is turning into a global “*le Nègre*.”

“*Le Nègre*” is a narrative in which the narrator is alien to African culture. “*Le Nègre*” undergoes changes depending on the needs of those in power and shifts in the structure of power relations. As Mbembe points out, there are two narratives of “*le Nègre*,” namely the European account of Africa and Africans and the narrative of the African American diaspora about Africa as their ancestral homeland [Mbembe 2017: 1–10, 38–70].

As Mbembe points out, the second narrative became an important step toward the acquisition of subjectivity by the formerly oppressed. To the very same extent that such a narrative became a means of gaining self-consciousness for the “Black Atlantic,” it also became a mechanism for their alienation from Africa itself [Mbembe 2017: 70–77]. Both narratives imply *the exclusion* of the object of the story through the *narrator’s* alienation from it (roughly: “I am certainly not what I am talking about”). Nevertheless, it allows for the acquisition of agency within the structure of power relations regardless of the narrator’s race. This understanding points to Mbembe’s anti-essentialist paradigm. For the theorist, race constitutes a construct of *exclusion*, formed to affirm the subjectivity of the narrator who constructs the narrative. A race-centered type of narrative involves the hierarchization of groups of people based on constructed characteristics. By relying on the construction of race, the subject acquires their own sovereignty (the sovereignty of their race).

With such a broad understanding, an unlimited number of things fall under the category of race, as a result of which the term loses not only its connection to conventional usage but also its semantic content. Such a definition allows one to speak of the “race” of women, children, plants, animals, and so on.

The origins of this interpretation of the term can be traced back to Frantz Fanon’s “Black Skin, White Masks.” In this work, the author of Martinique descent argues, in a manner quite similar to that of Achille Mbembe, that race is a social construct that laid the foundation for colonial domination. To explain the phenomenon of racism, Frantz Fanon turns to psychoanalysis. He sees the root of racism in the “white” person’s fear of the distinctive features of the “black” person, namely their particular use of language and their distinctive phenotypic characteristics. This phobia is formed from childhood due to socialization in a society partly shaped by stereotypes about the *Other*. In such a social landscape, attention is inevitably focused precisely on these traits [Fanon 2022].

Thus, race is a social construct that seeks to hierarchize society based on prescribed traits attributed to members of broad anthropological and ethnic groups. Moreover, these traits are considered unique to that specific group. The social construct of race is formed through the representation of a particular group with an emphasis on this trait as one that excludes *others* from the community. In other words, race can be defined as the totality

of linguistic, phenotypic, and anthropological characteristics of a particular community of people as a component of the image of the “*Other*,” given its hierarchical predetermination.

Observable features here are seen as a reflection of certain internal qualities. Thus, skin color, accent, or an element of traditional lifestyle in a specific social context are perceived as indicators of internal inferiority or any other characteristics.

Racist notions of inferiority are often being accepted by oppressed groups. Mbembe refers to this process by which colonized peoples accept their position as *internalization* or *routinization* [Mbembe 2015: 32–34; Mbembe 2019: 47].

Returning to biopolitics as such and to the origins of Mbembe’s work, it is important to note that Foucault identifies the emergence of biopolitics without conceptualizing its spatial dimension. Agamben, on the other hand, focuses on the spatial component of biopolitics. Referring to the German political philosopher C. Schmitt (1888–1985), the Italian thinker speaks of the formation of specific sites of the “state of exception” as a necessary topos of included exclusion. The concentration camp becomes the ultimate expression of biopolitics [Agamben 1998].

For Agamben, biopolitics predated Modernity. He views politics as a sphere that inherently contains an “included exclusion,” realized through interventions on the human body. Biopolitics is, in essence, “anthropologically timeless.” Furthermore, unlike M. Foucault, in Agamben’s theory there is an agentic distinction between the one who excludes and the one who is excluded.

Mbembe, while describing in detail the mechanism of necropolitics in the “early Modern” (the era of the slave trade) and the “late Modern” (the colonial and contemporary eras), does not speak of a rigid connection between the advent of colonialism and necropolitics. In this regard, the history of necropolitics is quite close to the thought of Agamben. For Mbembe, necropolitical spaces, Schmitt’s concept of the “state of emergency,” included exclusion, and the dichotomy of the governing and the governed are also important. However, in his arguments, the political philosopher draws specifically on the concept of race.

When interpreting “necropolitics” in relation to the theories of Foucault and Agamben, it is appropriate to speak of race *sacra* (“the cursed race”). The subject of necropolitics dictates who should live and who should die based on a racial hierarchy. Biopolitics fails to capture the reality of colonialism and instances of racial segregation, which is why Mbembe introduces a new term.

## COMPONENTS OF NECROPOLITICS

The category of the territorial extent of necropolitical sovereignty is quite remarkable. The boundaries of sovereignty lie in the very definition of who should die and who should live. Thus, sovereign power is not fixed to a specific territory occupied by some Leviathan. This non-territoriality manifests itself in war as the possibility of achieving sovereignty or asserting it. Also important is the concept of the *war machine*, which Mbembe understands as a necropolitical subject combining the qualities of trading companies and armed formations [Mbembe 2019: 85–86]. That is, various warlords, corporations, and so on can also be sovereigns.

It is appropriate to speak of the sovereignty of a state or any other subject over territories not under its control if there is a real possibility of disposing of the lives of the population of a specific geographical area with impunity. An entity resisting in war may possess sovereignty without having full control over its own territory or the enemy's territory, since here it possesses the right to kill. Thus, war is a clash between two entities of necropolitics.

Taking this idea to a higher level of abstraction, it can be noted that in the system of international relations, the sovereignty of major powers can manifest itself in determining the fate of the inhabitants of certain regions (for example, in the Gaza Strip). That is, as an actor's significance in the world order grows, it inevitably becomes a subject of necropolitics, without always even realizing or accepting this fact.

In the era of early Modernity, as Mbembe characterizes the period of colonialism's emergence, such territorial boundlessness of sovereignty predetermined the formation of relations between the colony and the metropolis. On the other hand, the dependence of human social existence on material objects within a concrete space dictates the necessity of territorialization in necropolitics.

Mbembe identifies several key topoi of necropolitics. These forms of spatial organization include plantations, colonies, and various forms of spatial segregation of the population ("apartheidization"). The latter category, being quite broad, encompasses the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, South African apartheid, and various detention centers for migrants [Mbembe 2019: 79–81].

The philosopher refers to the spaces of necropolitics as *death-worlds*. Each of these worlds of death stems from *a desire for an enemy*, that is, the construction of an enemy image driven by the suppression of one's own fear of external threats and the conscious necessity of keeping *the Other's* living space under one's control. It is precisely this desire that has predetermined segregation and division within *death-worlds*. The emerging bounds of "the society of enmity" evoke a particular existential sense of discomfort and anxiety in both sides of the conflict; therefore, Mbembe calls them *the relations of enmity*.

The death-worlds examined by A. Mbembe historically succeeded one another. While the plantation was the dominant form at the dawn of colonialism, in the later period it was the colony as an administered territory. The present era, however, is characterized by the ubiquity of segregationist practices, which causes the theorist the greatest concern, since this artificial division and demarcation stems from the same mechanism as slavery.

In Mbembe's works, material and aesthetic forms of power expression are also significant. The philosopher repeatedly lists various methods and means of segregation, emphasizing this point. Later, the crudeness and harshness of external forms of power expression would become a cornerstone of the concept of "brutalism" in the book of the same name [Mbembe 2024]. However, even earlier, as for example in the work "On the Postcolony," the author paid special attention to the aestheticization of violence [Mbembe 2015: 102–141].

Returning to the question of territoriality, it is worth emphasizing once again the blurred boundaries of the death-worlds. Rather, they constitute logistical corridors for the movement of populations. Thus, plantations implicitly involved the acquisition and

transportation of slaves; colonies—routes for redirecting various economic resources to the metropolis; places of segregation—prescribed modes of mass population movement.

The worlds of death are inhabited by *the living dead*, that is, people placed in an intermediate state between death and life. The life of each individual living dead person plays no role and has no economic or social significance. Those who represent the sovereign in any specific territory are not included in the world of death.

A key feature of necropolitics is its duality. It defines not only the object of necropolitics (“who should die”) but also power-holders, “who should live.” This duality formed the core of necropolitics. It also predetermined the emergence of the modern world order. Necropolitics implies an “included exclusion” of the type “I live because they die.” The norm of life is formed through exclusion from it.

For Mbembe, the category of race always exists within the dual dichotomy of oppressor and oppressed. Democratic regimes, which are defined by Mbembe as former and current metropolises characterized by an asymmetry in the right to life between races, possess a “*nocturnal*” body. Human rights for the racial group in power become possible only through the “included exclusion” of another race from this category. It is precisely this relationship that has shaped the coexistence of the oppressed and the oppressors within a single political body. In contemporary “nocturnal” Western states, this “included exclusion” is applied to migrants from former colonies.

It is precisely this “nocturnal body,” to which the first chapter of the work “Necropolitics” (2019) is devoted, that explains the aforementioned problem of the exclusion of the oppressed from Thomas Hobbes’s theory. The social contract here functions through the mechanism of “included exclusion,” i.e., the presence of population groups that are not part of it. However, these excluded races still, paradoxically, constitute the body of Leviathan. As Mbembe notes, the high level of security in democratic countries became possible thanks to the spillover of violence from the territory of the former metropolis to the former colonies; and currently toward the formerly colonized [Mbembe 2019: 9–41].

Mbembe does not treat the two poles of the oppressor–oppressed dichotomy as discontinuous. One cannot say, for example, that people of Indian descent and the Black population of South Africa during the apartheid era (1948–1994) formed communities that differed in the degree of their oppression. Both categories constitute an oppressed multitude. Their oppression, despite the asymmetry of their statuses, is determined by the impossibility of overturning the hierarchical system. The distinction exists only between the subject and object of necropolitics. Despite the many contradictions among the Indian population and the Bantu- and Khoisan-speaking peoples of apartheid-era South Africa, they could not influence the racial hierarchy, unlike the majority of Afrikaners and the English-speaking white population.

For each individual, necropolitics signifies the dualism of subject and object, where one is invisibly present within the other. The oppressor always coexists with the shadow of the object of necropolitics: first, by virtue of forming their own identity and norms through the mechanism of included exclusion (“we” and “our norms,” understood as “not-them” and “not-their norms”), and second, because of fear. The greatest fear for the oppressor is the very possibility that the “right of the sword” will be turned against him. For the oppressed subject of necropolitics, it exists as a constant reminder of their own

“inferiority.” The object of necropolitics is forced to don what Frantz Fanon called the “white mask.”

Mutual alienation requires the subject of necropolitics to form certain power structures in which narratives of racial superiority take the form of disciplinary power. The idea of a racial hierarchy must be accepted by both poles of the dichotomy. One of the mechanisms of necropolitics is “*nanodeath*”.

The “*nanodeath*” consists of various discursive and institutionalized racist acts of communication. Whatever the subtext, the emphasis on racial division is a manifestation of necropolitics at the micro-level. The “*nanodeath*” reinforces the power hierarchy, encouraging violent measures. Institutionalized forms, on the other hand, bureaucratize racism, as if “cleansing” it of its ideological foundations (for example, security measures during the “War on Terror”) [Mbembe 2019: 57–60].

Ideas about the role of everyday interaction originate in the work “On the Postcolony”, in which A. Mbembe discusses the everyday practices of colonialism. Thus, when seizing territory due to the numerical superiority of the conquered population, the conqueror must routinize the division between the colonizers and the colonized and automate and mechanize the racial hierarchy [Mbembe 2015: 35–39]. For this reason, it is important not only how violence by some over others is entrenched, but also what modes of expression of this violence the sovereign employs. Violence must be embodied in crude and repressive forms. Only then can it entrench the alienation and subjugation of the object of necropolitics. Through brutal practices, fear of the conquerors becomes latent.

By “*brutalism*” A. Mbembe means the practice of reducing the existing (including living matter) to the level of raw material that can be counted and computerized. In brutalism, as an epoch of modern capitalism, there is a certain blurring of the natural and the artificial, facilitated by the development of new digital technologies.

Here, the metaphor of the architectural style is significant, in which, through its imposing appearance, raw material symbolizes the boundlessness and limitlessness of power. In the era of brutalism, power manifests itself in the fact that it determines the forms and boundaries of this material transformed into concrete. Mbembe warns that brutalism, as a typical feature of Modernity, leads to the “Africanization” (“*devenir-nègre*”) of the entire world [Mbembe 2024: 1–26].

Mbembe often characterizes necropolitics as “brutal.” “Brutalism” in the 2020 publication differs somewhat from the use of the term “brutality” in the 2017 work, although their semantic fields are quite similar due to the metaphor employed. In the first case, the term refers more to a temporal period in which certain processes unfold. In the second case, within the necropolitical understanding of power, brutality represents more of an emphasis on the aesthetic aspect of violence.

In the context of an objectification that has already taken place, it is important to permanently and demonstratively reduce living matter to the status of *concrete*, elevating cruelty to the level of a necessary impact on raw matter, which is confined within a dead-end, clearly delineated space, “sealed with concrete.” Figuratively speaking, the brutality of necropolitics can be defined as the realization of the necessity to “pour concrete anew” each time in order to prevent its “corrosion.” Thus, under necropolitics, the *brutality* of power should be understood as the constant, demonstrative reconstruction of the living

human being as functional, coarse matter. What is fundamental here is precisely the demonstrative nature of the act of violence, since the human being is already in the status of an object, a fact that must be constantly reminded to the objectified.

It is virtually impossible for those in power to reconsider their attitude toward the object of necropolitics. Rejecting racial hierarchies is perceived as capitulation to the “right of the sword” of the other. As Mbembe argues, to free oneself from necropolitics and transition to a decolonized world “coming out of the dark night,” it is necessary to apply Fanon’s “pharmakon” [Mbembe 2019: 117–152]. Pharmakon is a term derived from Plato’s dialogue “Phaedrus,” which the French founder of philosophical deconstructionism J. Derrida (1930–2004) used to denote the violence necessary to resolve a particular situation [Derrida 2014: 338–360].

For Mbembe, as for Fanon, violence produced by the objects of necropolitics is their acquisition of their own subjectivity. The key to overcoming necropolitics is to overthrow the hierarchy of power and overcome the conception of the human being as an object. To achieve this goal, any means of leveling and erasing the boundaries between the poles of necropolitics is a path to “healing.” By independently determining who should die, the former object of necropolitics becomes a sovereign.

Violence is merely one of the possibilities for acquiring subjectivity and equality. Although it becomes the ultimate means of acquiring agency, its necropolitical potential must remain under control and culminate in mutual emancipation, rather than a mere seizure of the “right of the sword” in favor of the formerly oppressed.

Mbembe also proposes nonviolent forms of struggle through the deviation from the prescribed norms and the arts. In both cases, the object of necropolitics acquires its agency by transcending necropolitical relations; however, this is a desirable yet more time-consuming and complex method of reclaiming oneself. As an African theorist, A. Mbembe pays particular attention in this regard to Afrofuturism and Afropolitism (largely cosmopolitanism at the African level) [Mbembe 2014, Mbembe 2020].

Mbembe, as an opponent of nationalism and borders of any kind, does not offer concrete alternative forms of polity after decolonization. Given the significant role that A. Mbembe assigns to local knowledge, perhaps a decolonized polity should reflect the historical experience of a particular local community. Given the diversity of political forms of communities, the establishment of Earth as a common home in its ecological, political, and economic senses truly serves the interests of the global multitude.

Thus, decolonization as a process of rejecting necropolitics implies the acquisition of one’s own subjectivity and a rethinking of sovereignty as a dualism of life and death. This goal can be achieved in various ways: both violent and more constructive. In practice, however, a combination of these methods seems more likely.

Necropolitics is the dehumanization of the individual as a social being, in the sense that it is not the person who is put to death but the sum of his prescribed qualities. The subject kills (both in the literal sense of the word and by denying any possibility other than unquestioning submission) not an individual but their belonging to a race. The collective body of the *living dead* has already experienced the cessation of its existence through some of its individual members.

Reverse transformation into an individual human body, in the appropriate case, presupposes universal solidarity based on the commonality of lived experience and the

construction of alternative, decolonized horizontal networks of interaction. Sovereignty, in its bio- and necropolitical understanding, thereby ceases to exist, and sovereignty acquires the meaning of autonomy when integrated into a global network. To a large extent, a similar trend can be observed in the construction of interactions among the global majority.

Referring to Hegel, Mbembe explains the origin of necropolitics. For Hegel, a human is one who negates nature through labor and its exploitation. By renouncing the “animal” principle, a human chooses death (in the form of experiences of life’s finitude) as the consequence of negating nature. Without the negation of nature, death would not be an event of *human* life but merely a natural phenomenon [Mbembe 2019: 68–69].

For a European who encountered a different technological order in what would later become his colonies, evident was the absence/inadequacy of subjectivity (i.e., of humanity) of the local population. The peoples to be colonized did not exploit natural resources as the Europeans did and therefore were not considered human in the full sense.

In this context, death was not a choice for the colonized and thus was not considered valuable. A human being came to be perceived in the same way as any other object of nature, valuable only in the context of exploiting their inclusion in economic relations. Therefore, the death of a member of another race had no social value, especially when there was a surplus of such individuals for economic relations. Thus, necropolitics, it seems, arises from the psychological shock of encountering the *Other*, which is resolved through self-assertion via violent actions.

The Hegelian explanation, however, is insufficient to resolve the problem of the economic inexpediency of necropolitical excesses. Why kill the dehumanized body of the subjugated if it constitutes capital, even if only in the form of free labor?

To resolve this paradox, Mbembe draws on the philosophy of death by Georges Bataille (1897–1962) [Mbembe 2019: 70]. For this French philosopher and writer, sovereignty is based on a constant going beyond one’s own limits, on *transgression*, and on a state of *excess*. To go beyond its own limits, the sovereign body turns to the experience of the transcendent, that is, to the sacred and to death. Here, the sovereign goes beyond the bounds of economic expediency. In this context, murder is a means of asserting one’s power. In Bataille’s philosophy, death becomes an extreme abundance, since life is squandered completely and without subsequent exchange. This is where sovereignty is revealed—in the extent to which the sovereign can go beyond the profane, beyond the useful and the mundane [Bataille 1991; Agamben 2020: 249–253].

Thus, necropolitics seeks to resolve the paradox of the futility of violence in the exploitation of certain racial groups. Necropolitics places race in a space where it becomes both a commodity and an object of sovereign power. Moreover, it can be assumed that the more significant the political dimension of necropolitics becomes in comparison to the economic one, the higher the level of violence.

#### THE CONCEPT OF NECROPOLITICS AS A THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR STUDYING SOVEREIGNTY AND VIOLENCE

An interpretation of Mbembe’s works allows us to identify a general theoretical framework for studying various issues in world politics and political philosophy, where

the phenomenon of violence occupies a significant place. Thanks to its comprehensive explanation of this complex and widespread phenomenon, Mbembe's concept can be further developed independently of questions of colonialism.

In the most general sense, necropolitics can be defined as the process of hierarchization based on racial differences. This hierarchy creates two mutually dependent sets: the community of necropolitics' subjects and the aggregate of its objects. The former possesses sovereignty, that is, the right to decree the death of the *Other's* collective body. Furthermore, the sovereign seeks to prevent the possibility of stepping outside such relations out of fear of ending up in the place of the dehumanized. Therefore, the subject of necropolitics seeks to deny the objects of necropolitics everything individual and even the most personal event of their lives, which is death. From this fear stems the rationality of the sovereign, which does not always imply expediency. Violence, while remaining rational in the eyes of the subject of power, inevitably leads to resistance in its extreme forms. In the event of the inevitability of death on the part of the object of necropolitics, violence also appears justified. In this regard, necropolitics is a conflict-generating factor that determines the entire structure of society within a specific territory.

Nevertheless, it cannot be said that Mbembe justifies violence. For those deprived of subjectivity, it can indeed be emancipating; however, the ultimate goal must be the restructuring of previous relations within the framework of horizontal, networked coexistence. Furthermore, the acquisition of subjectivity must also be built not only on a destructive but also on a creative component. The greatest concern, both for Mbembe and for the subjects of necropolitics he critiques, lies in the likelihood that the "right of the sword" will indeed turn against the former oppressors, resulting in the system of oppression being reformatted but not eliminated.

In the context of the dynamics of power relations, the following general pattern of the emergence and implementation of necropolitics can be formulated. A community with one type of rationality encounters the distinct rationality of another community. The two rationalities differ due to the contrasting ecological and economic conditions of their social structures. Then, in the event that one community establishes dominance over another, the image of the subjugated is formed through an exclusion from the category of the human. Within the structure of dominance, the subject propagates racial stereotypes, legitimizing violence against the *Other*. Moreover, "race" here represents a hyperbolization of the linguistic, anthropological, and phenotypic characteristics of a particular ethnic group, the purpose of which is to prove the *Other's* lack of rationality. The object around which racist stereotypes are formed is also forced into interpellation, e.g., into recognizing themselves in these prejudices.

The subject acquires its "nocturnal body," where its power directly depends on reinforcing the notion of the "inferiority" of the *Other*. This forced coexistence of the subject and object of necropolitics forms *bonds of enmity*, which then materialize through institutional division within a specific space—*death worlds*. Manifestations of sovereignty may vary, but what they have in common is their *brutality*. The way to overcome such a situation for the object of necropolitics is to acquire their own agency, that is, to destroy the racial hierarchy itself.

Mbembe's conceptual model unravels the contradiction of the economic irrationality of neglecting the living conditions of the *living dead*, pointing to a different logic underlying the situation. Instead of striving for the common good or the full exploitation of the economic component of the human body, the exclusion embedded within the norm of "human wholeness" allows the sovereign to assert his power. The drive to maximize power out of fear of losing it ("*the right of the sword*") explains the emerging violence, the intensity of which only grows over time. Any subsequent assertion of power requires ever-new *transgressions* and an ever-increasing scale of death.

Since the ultimate manifestation of necropolitics is the very act of taking a life, the ultimate means of dismantling the racial hierarchy is also killing. For Mbembe, it does not matter whom the object of necropolitics kills. Both suicide and murder are ways to acquire sovereignty [Mbembe 2019: 88–90]. However, it is important to understand that killing by one of the two poles of subject-object relations serves as an indicator of the limit of the hostile relations between them. The expansionist nature of sovereignty, which strives for the constant incorporation of new spheres and its own affirmation, can lead to more active resistance and mutually reinforcing irrational violence. In war, both groups acquire their subjectivity. Nevertheless, necropolitics can also remain at a moderate level and be limited to the scale of *nanodeath*.

Thus, using the tools of necropolitics as a theoretical and methodological framework can provide a deeper understanding of a whole range of phenomena in political life. For example, necropolitics allows for a better understanding of the logic of armed conflict or the asymmetry in the reactions of international organizations and great powers to similar events in different locations. The scope of necropolitics can also vary, ranging from practices of "*nano-death*" to genocide.

## POSSIBLE FRAMEWORK FOR AN ANALYSES

Necropolitics is a form of domination based on the deliberate degradation of the existence of masses of people on the grounds of their belonging to a distinct racial group within a specific territory, where the individual is placed in the space between life and death. The category of race, in this context, is defined as a social construct situated within the subject-object dichotomy of necropolitics, emphasizing the phenotypic, anthropological, and linguistic characteristics of a particular group. The goal of racism is to affirm the notion of the *Other's* lack of rationality and thus their lack of humanity.

An interpretation of A. Mbembe's works allows us to formulate the key parameters of necropolitics. Applying the necropolitical matrix to conflicts requires an understanding of their underlying structural factors (*Table 1*).

First, the formation of necropolitics requires the existence of a subject–object dichotomy. That is, their coexistence within a single polity, a single political body, is necessary. For the ruling subject, there must be a sense or other necessity to control the territory inhabited by the "surplus" population, which is deemed fundamentally different. In this context, the problem of forced coexistence arises, that is, *bonds of enmity*.

It leads to the bonds of enmity being materialized and localized and shaping discourse as well. Thus, a concrete yet fluid space of the *death-worlds* emerges, where the living dead dwell. The multidimensionality of the *death-worlds* is conferred by the

exclusion from it of the subject of necropolitics while the subject is physically located within the territory of the death-worlds. Within this death-world, “nanodeath” is prevalent; e.g., the institutionalized and discursive form of the killing of the collective body.

Table 1. **Key Elements of the Concept of Necropolitics**

Parameter of analysis	Content	Examples
Bonds of enmity	Analysis of the meaning of the coexistence of the subject and object of necropolitics within a single political body	Ideological justifications for a territory being under the sovereign’s control (e.g., the doctrine of civilizational exceptionalism)
Death-world	The spatial organization of necropolitics	The features of a refugee camp
Nanodeath	The study of discursive and institutionalized aspects of discrimination	The problem of discrimination within the education system or access to it
Racial hierarchization	Examining the process of racialization, e.g., the construction of race	Stereotypes associated with different skin colors (in particular, the racial identity of the indigenous peoples of New Guinea)
The annihilation of the collective body	Reflections on the materialized process of objectification and the denial of subjectivity due to belonging to a particular group	Uneven and unjust exploitation of natural resources in the territories inhabited by certain groups
Brutality	Identification of demonstrative and expressive aspects of violence	Physical practices of suppressing resistance (public torture and executions, the ostentatious display of the bodies of those punished in crowded public places)

Source: compiled by the authors.

Since the asymmetry of racial categories is the concept being at the core of necropolitics, the next parameter of necropolitics to highlight is the *racial hierarchization*. The basic condition of necropolitics is the formulation of racial inequality, where the visible external manifestations of “unworthy” races reflect their internal “defectiveness.” It is precisely on the basis of external differences that necropolitical interpellation occurs.

By producing the living dead, necropolitics *annihilates the collective identity of the oppressed*. A key feature of necropolitics lies in the denial of agency to subordinate racial groups, which can also be characterized as objectification or the deprivation of subjectivity.

Finally, the implementation of necropolitics must manifest itself with particular cruelty, through which the foundation of the oppressor–oppressed dichotomy is cemented. Violence must be demonstrative and *brutal*.

Thus, the theoretical and methodological framework of the concept of necropolitics involves examining a given conflict situation based on the following parameters: bonds

of enmity, death-world, nanodeath, racial hierarchization, the annihilation of the collective body, and brutality.

## CONCLUSION

The concept of necropolitics, forming the semantic core of A. Mbembe's works, is an important component of the emerging dialogue between Western universalist conceptual models and non-Western reality. Entering into an invisible dispute with the Hobbesian tradition of thinking about sovereignty, the concept under examination introduces a number of significant adjustments to the question of the interplay between violence and security.

Necropolitics significantly expands the body of Leviathan, incorporating those excluded from the social contract. Furthermore, Leviathan here departs from a hierarchical and centralized figure, becoming more akin to a sovereign network within the death-world. The collective sovereign may turn out to be not only the state but also war machines or insurgents. A necropolitical analysis can broaden our understanding of the functions and motivations of a wide variety of non-state actors: from the non-institutionalized masses of the oppressed population to the complex structures of private military companies. Moreover, the concept of necropolitics not only highlights the role of the subalterns and the oppressed but also allows us to trace the general logic of their political activity.

Mbembe's body of ideas enables us to develop a deeper understanding of the challenges involved in the substantive (rather than formal) decolonization of states, alongside their simultaneous sovereignty-building. Decolonization here becomes an attempt to overcome the bonds of enmity and the drive toward division, which is reflected in the creation of rhizomatic (non-hierarchical) relationships. In this regard, the clear normative tone of the African political philosopher's theoretical generalizations should be counted among the merits of the concept of necropolitics.

It appears that the greatest heuristic potential of the concept of necropolitics can be revealed when applied to the analysis of political violence, since the logic of A. Mbembe's works allows for the identification of deep structural contradictions and provides a comprehensive analysis of several sides of the conflict at once. Furthermore, within the framework of a necropolitical understanding of power, special attention can be paid to any particular aspect of it: for example, the means of overcoming epistemological violence through art or the ecological factors of conflict.

Given Mbembe's particular focus on the past and present of African states, necropolitical analysis may be of interest for analyzing African reality. Nevertheless, in light of Mbembe's thesis on the "Africanization" of the entire world, an opportunity arises to assess processes in other regions from an African perspective.

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Научная статья

## КОНЦЕПЦИЯ НЕКРОПОЛИТИКИ А. МБЕМБЕ: СУЩНОСТЬ И ПРОБЛЕМЫ ПОСТКОЛОНИАЛЬНОГО СУВЕРЕНИТЕТА

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**Аннотация.** Настоящая работа представляет собой исследование концепции некрополитики, разработанной ведущим африканским политическим философом Ашилем Мбембе, в контексте проблематики деколонизации и суверенизации государств Африки. В тексте осуществляется критический анализ указанной концепции через ее соотнесение с классической гоббсовской парадигмой суверенитета, а также с интеллектуальной генеалогией концепции биополитики. Авторы выявляют теоретические лакуны универсалистской модели общественного договора, демонстрируя ее ограниченность для объяснения структур насилия и исключения, сформировавшихся в колониальную и постколониальную эпохи. В результате теоретической реконструкции раскрывается содержание концепта некрополитики, определяемой как форма суверенной власти, основанной на расовой иерархизации и праве определять, кому жить, а кому умереть. В работе проанализированы ее ключевые составляющие: пространственная организация «миров смерти», статус «живых мертвецов», дискурсивные практики «малой смерти» и эстетическое измерение «брутальности». Основным результатом исследования является разработка теоретико-методологической схемы анализа, структурированной вокруг шести взаимосвязанных параметров (узы вражды, мир смерти, малая смерть, расовая иерархизация, умерщвление коллективного тела, брутальность). Данный методологический аппарат представляет собой инструментарий для анализа структур политического насилия и позволяет получить более нюансированное представление о динамике политического насилия, выходя за рамки традиционных европоцентричных подходов. Работа вносит вклад в развитие постколониальной (или деколонизальной) оптики в политической теории и предлагает актуальный аналитический инструмент для переосмысления дихотомии насилия и безопасности. Некрополитическая рамка анализа обладает потенциалом применения как для изучения африканской политической реальности, так и для оценки процессов в других регионах мира, что соответствует тезису А. Мбембе об «африканизации» современного мира.

**Ключевые слова:** Ашиль Мбембе, некрополитика, деколонизация, суверенность, биополитика, Томас Гоббс, политическое насилие, колониализм, пост-колониализм, расизм

**Персональный вклад авторов.** Совместное исследование.

**Конфликт интересов.** Авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

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