

The Necropolitics of COVID-19: A Global South Approach to the Current Pandemic

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The first sentence of Achille Mbembe's essay "[Necropolitics](#)" (2003) begins with the assertion that "the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die."¹ The pandemic of COVID-19 appears to be a test of this contention. Mbembe's argument for the emergence of a new form of politics centered on power over death, recently elaborated in a [book](#) of the same title, precedes this pandemic and has been applied primarily to the context of Africa.² Nonetheless, his concept provides a way of thinking through the politics of the current moment without resorting to conventional frameworks of left and right that have preoccupied discussions thus far in the Global North. Though this established set of politics has fundamentally shaped the infrastructural capacities of states to respond to the crisis, namely with northern democracies such as Britain and the United States facing a distinct challenge in responding from years of austerity and the privatization of medical care, neither should the opportunity be lost to think differently about what is at stake. COVID-19 isn't simply a medical or epidemiological crisis; it is a crisis of sovereignty.

The events of the past weeks and months cannot be completely recapitulated in this instance, but they can be characterized as an attempt to *reclaim* sovereignty. They reveal an emergent necropolitical landscape defined by states that have power over life and those with only power over death. A brief sketch of notifications, bans, and closures is useful in this regard: medical doctors in Wuhan, China, first report the existence of an unspecified virus in late December 2019; on January 23, 2020, the city of Wuhan with 11 million people is placed in a mandatory quarantine with additional travel restrictions in place for other cities in the Hubei province (totaling 57 million people); Italy declares a state of emergency eight days later on January 31, 2020; Italy imposes a national quarantine on March 9, 2020; a travel ban is put into place on March 11, 2020, by the Trump administration for travelers from Europe who are not US citizens; Spain announces a national quarantine on March 15, 2020; on the same day Germany implements new border

¹ Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003), 11.

² Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

restrictions; South Africa places a travel ban on foreign nationals from high-risk countries on March 18, 2020; Australia imposes a travel ban on foreign nationals on March 19, 2020; and so forth. What this brief summary outlines is a return to the most basic techniques of territorial control and state power—a politics of border restriction, community management, evening curfews, business closure, public dispersal, and empty streets. Citizens are further asked to self-discipline, in a Foucauldian fashion, through social distancing. The scale, speed, and global extent of these sovereign measures appear unprecedented.

To be clear, these measures *should* be pursued. In contrast to normative conditions when such methods would be seen as authoritarian, they are essential for sustaining life in this instance. Taken together, they constitute a reactionary version of necropolitics concerned with the management of life and death—to reduce the territorial proliferation of the disease, mortality numbers, and the rate of infection more generally. However, this reactionary stance equally indicates an unevenness of state capacity, that not all governments are able to respond alike. COVID-19 has highlighted a long-term failure among some states to sustain public health, to sustain life, through their commitment to neoliberal agendas to end state welfare in favor of privatization. The US and British governments are particularly egregious in governing on the basis of provisional schemes of affordable death through privatization and austerity measures, respectively. UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s initial proposal of “herd immunity” whereby COVID-19 is allowed to run its course through the population exemplifies this approach—a *laissez-faire* economic attitude applied to ordinary, vulnerable people in the context of a disease pandemic.

If COVID-19 has evinced a necropolitical approach to the lives of citizens and non-citizens that has remained latent until now, it is partly because this power over death contrasts with Mbembe’s original emphasis on the spectacle of war machines and suicide bombing, among other features. The necropower dynamics of COVID-19 and other pandemics, whether Ebola or HIV, is one of slow violence. After decades of reduced infrastructure for medical care in many countries, whether through limited facilities in rural areas or through the sheer scarcity of life-saving hospital equipment witnessed now, national governments cannot guarantee or even administer life, except through the crudest forms of non-medical state control and cold violence against non-citizens as cited earlier. Approached differently, who gets to live and who gets to die is dependent on the

goodwill, ability, and expertise of medical workers and others directly engaged with the situation. The power to dictate who may live has been outsourced and increasingly privatized, available only to those who can afford it.

A word on economy: if this necropolitical landscape has largely remained invisible until now, it is also because the spectacle of global capitalism has concealed this political dispensation. Even now, a brief glance at daily news headlines highlights how the sharp decline of the world economy and fears of capitalist recession have garnered equal attention to the disease itself, with Global North solutions to the pandemic being envisioned in monetary terms in addition to the sovereign measures described earlier, whether through interest rate cuts by central banks, industry bailouts, or checks in the mail. The framing of the COVID-19 pandemic as an economic crisis is not only revealing of what priorities of sovereignty are at work, but it also indicates the limited tools of neoliberal state power in relation to matters of crisis and social disorder that do not relate directly to fiscal policy.

To be clear, policy measures that sustain the economic livelihoods of those hardest hit *should* be implemented. But such immediate measures should not distract from or appease the pursuit of long-term solutions to economic injustice. Indeed, the emergent economics of COVID-19 discloses in stark terms what we already know: the corrosive effects of neoliberal policies over economic life, whether through the erosion of social security programs, unemployment welfare, or public education, has reorganized sovereign state power away from securing life and sustaining well-being, to being solely concerned with the arbitration of death as seen now.

The necropolitics of COVID-19 consequently uncovers both the strengths and limits of Mbembe's original intervention, as important as it was and still is. Published shortly after a millennial moment of reflection, with the 1994 Rwandan Genocide and civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone during the 1990s still in the conscience of many, his argument sought to provide an answer to the basic question as to why episodes of violence continued to afflict the African continent despite decades of independence, well after the violence of the colonial period. As an alternative to the structural argument of colonialism and its ethnic legacies as analyzed by Mahmood Mamdani in *Citizen and Subject* (1996), Mbembe proposed the postcolonial consummation of a new kind of state regime

and state ontology that drew upon legacies of colonial biopolitics, but also departed from them by becoming more flagrant in assuming power over death—creating “death worlds” for citizens and non-citizens rather than the “life worlds” associated with more normative understandings of state sovereignty. What Mbembe could not easily foresee is how the state itself in a global context of neoliberal pressures has been re-instrumentalized in different ways, resulting in its marginalization vis-à-vis questions of life versus death. Being charged with the capacity to dictate life and death in a de facto way, as seen now during a time of epidemiological crisis, is not the same as pursuing it proactively as first described by Mbembe.

Nonetheless, the concept of necropolitics provides a different register for thinking through the dimensions of this unfolding political moment, in particular the situation of state failure in the Global North, thus extending the uses of this concept beyond its origins. The crisis of sovereignty that COVID-19 has produced in the US, Britain, and other northern liberal democracies underscores the interpretive power that theory from the Global South has for readdressing the claims and limits of contemporary state power. Though it is too early to be conclusive about either the immediate or long-term political effects of COVID-19, the geography of response that has surfaced underscores how states are attempting to recoup sovereign power over matters of public health. While the idea of necropolitics has never been strong as a rallying point for political solidarity, it can, as a critical method, contribute to a more progressive and radical political vision of what states could be like in the future—endowed with the ambition and purpose of sustaining life, rather than solely, and belatedly, administering death.

This commentary originally appeared on the website Africa is a Country (<https://africasacountry.com/>) on April 1, 2020. It was written with the information that was available at that time.