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# Africa in Motion: An interview with the post-colonialism theoretician Achille Mbembe

By Christian Höller & Achille Mbembe

In this useful introduction to Achille Mbembe, the African philosopher outlines his break with existing post-colonial theory and elaborates on his terms 'mutual zombification', 'postcolony' and 'necropower'. from Springerin:

[http://www.springerin.at/dyn/heft\\_text.php?textid=1195&lang=en#fussnoten](http://www.springerin.at/dyn/heft_text.php?textid=1195&lang=en#fussnoten)

Achille Mbembe further reading (thanks to s0metim3s):

Achille Mbembe 'On Private indirect Government'

<http://www.ucpress.edu/books/pages/6782/6782.ch2.pdf>

Achille Mbembe 'The Refugee Camp'

<http://classweb.gmu.edu/ncl130/s03/mbembe.htm>

Achille Mbembe 'Necropolitics'

<http://www.jhfc.duke.edu/icuss/pdfs/Mbembe.pdf>

Achille Mbembe 'Africa's frontiers in flux'

<http://mondediplo.com/1999/11/12africa>

Africa in Motion: An interview with the post-colonialism theoretician Achille Mbembe

For some time now, the post-colonialist researcher Achille Mbembe has been studying forms of political and cultural power on the African continent in the wake of colonialism. His main focus is on the emergence of an »Afro-cosmopolitan« culture, including its associated artistic processes.

Even before Documenta 11 took place, the cultural production of individual African countries had come to Western attention as an example of the way »world culture« could reshape itself. Although there is still disparaging talk of a »world province« or periphery, there have now long been approaches, both of an artistic and a theoretical nature, that cast fundamental doubt on the one-sidedness of these characterizations. Whereas »Africa« used to have negative connotations within Western discourse, whether as the »Dark Continent,« the »Heart of Darkness,« or even as a self-destructive »hole in world history,« recent post-colonial approaches are concerned with a locally informed rewriting of these externally imposed »negations.«

Achille Mbembe, who was born in Cameroon and now teaches at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, has attempted in a series of studies to provide the discourse about »Africa« with a historically adequate and complex foundation. His latest book, »On the Postcolony,« [1] is a determined endeavor to see the balance of power in the sub-Saharan countries - above all, Cameroon, Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, Ivory Coast, Benin, etc., which have been independent for some 40 years - against the background of the continuing colonial legacy and new international and regional influences. In his work, Mbembe covers themes ranging from the »banality« or »vulgarity of power,« demonstrated in the first decades of independence above all in the figure of the post-colonial autocrat and his lavish rituals of state culture, to contemporary and controversial forms of »private indirect government.« [2] As a consequence of the latter, state sovereignty, economic interests and power monopolies on the entire continent are tending to slide into a shadowy privatised area that is not answerable to any form of public scrutiny.

Mbembe thus sees both the various grotesque and obscene formations on whose basis the post-colonial regimes functioned at first, and the intensity of partly private, ethnically motivated, and arbitrarily administered violence, which has increased abruptly over the past decade, as being central factors in

African governmental systems. This is demonstrated equally by the re-burgeoning of »local« identities that are maintained by paramilitary means, and by the erosion of the state to be seen on all sides. However: »what, in the short run, has every appearance of chaos represents, in the long run, a violent resurgence of struggles over inequality and control of the means of coercion.«[3] At first, this gives the impression of being an uninterrupted continuation of the myth of Africa as an endless reservoir of violence and negativity, as a historyless, chaotic »gap in world time.« And yet Mbembe's historically circumspect inferences go towards showing how the global, complex interpenetration of autonomy and heteronomy is also producing new and fluid geographies of power on the African continent.

An »Africa in Motion« that liberates itself from the pupation and »zombification« of the colonial era: this is something the progenitor of today's discourses on post-colonialism and liberation, Frantz Fanon, wanted over 40 years ago. Mbembe, who takes up this legacy, has at first supplemented this concept with a new cartography of Africa.[4] Taking this as a basis, his diagnosis is that, in the face of the present situation, not only is the rhetoric of anti-imperialism exhausted, but also the discourse of »self-victimisation.« It is just as impossible to postulate ONE Africa, based on an ominous ethnic unity, as it is to maintain a collective »victim cult« (something which Mbembe condemns in the strongest terms). The many internal differences, ranging from different lines of tradition to religious surrogate regimes to the numerous, »extra-territorial« war fronts, suggest that the old, central contrast »Africa against the West« has now lost much of its legitimacy.

But Achille Mbembe does not say what form a revitalised, mostly self-determined »Afro-cosmopolitan« culture could take, or how it can cope with the constant stream of new demands and inscriptions resulting from global processes. It is clear that many artists, such as Pascale Marthine Tayou, Georges Adéagbo, Bodys Isek Kingelez and the group Huit Facettes (all of whom were also featured at Documental 1), have been working for some time with aesthetics of excess and »scattering« - aesthetics of sensuous surplus, overload and overelaboration that refer to and enter a dialogue with globalist, cosmopolitan projections onto each specific local context. Their works - along with many others - provide a foretaste of and visual counterpart to what Mbembe calls »African modes of self-writing.«[5]

Perhaps this will actually in the end lead again to a series of unconnected and isolated identities that are, however, at least no longer externally defined. Or, as Mbembe says: »Only the disparate, and often intersecting, practices through which Africans stylize their conduct and life can account for the thickness of which the African present is made.«[6]

**Christian Höller:** In your book *On the Postcolony*, you set out to describe the conditions under which contemporary social reality, or realities, across the African continent came about. What is intriguing at first sight is that you are targeting a single political-historical constellation that spans the whole continent. How important was it, or still is for you, to pay close attention to the manifold local differences - different marks of globalization so to speak that imprint themselves in quite different ways in different African territories? What, on the other hand, motivates the quest for a model of one »postcolony«?

**Achille Mbembe:** In the conclusion of *On the Postcolony*, I explicitly distance myself from this »montage.« I argue that the reality with which I have been concerned throughout the book exists only as a set of sequences and connections that extend themselves only to dissolve. It is a reality that is made up of superstitions, narratives and fictions that claim to be true in the very act through which they produce the false, while at the same time giving rise to both terror, hilarity and astonishment. Indeed, I define the postcolony as a timespace characterized by proliferation and multiplicity. As a temporal formation, the postcolony is definitely an era of dispersed entanglements, the unity of which is produced out of differences. From a spatial point of view, it is an overlapping of different,

intersected and entwined threads in tension with one another. Here, the task of the analyst is to tease out those threads, to locate those intersections and entwinements. This can only be done if, from the start, we take seriously the very compositeness of the postcolony.

Now if, as you suggest, there is a limit to the methodological approach I use in the book, it is certainly that the latter still relies, to a large extent, on social science epistemologies. In spite of substantive attempts (especially in chapter 5 and 6) the rupture with such epistemologies is still not radical enough. I wish I could have made it clearer that what is called Africa is first and foremost a geographical accident. It is this accident that we subsequently invest with a multitude of significations, diverse imaginary contents, or even fantasies, which, by force of repetition, end up becoming authoritative narratives. As a consequence of the above, what we call »Africa« could well be analyzed as a formation of desires, passions and undifferentiated fantasies. It is a subjective economy that is cultivated, nurtured, disciplined and reproduced. To nurture it, to police it and to reproduce it involve an intensive work of the imagination. But it also entails a tremendous labor of bad faith social science discourse does not know how to deal with.

**Christian Höller:** What has mostly become known under the heading »postcolonialism« in the West is a discourse vastly concerned with the identity-formation and symbolic dwellings of migrant subjects, now living in the Western metropolis. Your take on the »postcolony« seems to substantially differ from that discourse in several aspects, e.g. in so far as your focus of attention is decidedly directed towards Africa, and as you particularly pay attention to the material basis of contemporary social realities. How exactly would you describe your departure from the »Western« form of »postcolonialism«?

**Achille Mbembe:** There is no doubt that postcolonial theory, under its many guises, has decisively contributed to the »unmasking« of Western hegemony in the field of the humanities and in other disciplines. It has forced Western discourses on the self and the other, on difference and alterity, or on particularity and universality, to become accountable. In the process, postcolonial theory has revealed the violence of Western epistemologies and the dehumanizing impulses at the heart of their definition of the human. This task is far from over. In fact, it has become all the more urgent, especially in these times of ours when the ultimate expression of imperial sovereignty seems to reside, to a large extent, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die.

In such a context, it seems to me that postcolonial theory would gain a lot in reframing its foundational interrogations. When sovereign power has taken control over mortality and has defined life as the very site of the manifestation of absolute power, we need to start asking different questions. One such question is under what practical conditions is the right to kill, to allow to live or to expose to death exercised? Who is the subject of this right? What does the implementation of such a right tell us about the entity that is put to death and about the relation of enmity that sets it against its murderer? How can we account for the contemporary ways in which the political, under the guise of war, of resistance or of the fight against terror, makes the murder of the enemy its primary and absolute objective? Such a way of defining the issues raises a number of empirical and philosophical questions postcolonial theory has to address if it is still to be intellectually relevant.

The other challenge to postcolonial theory is what is referred to as »globalization«. Whether this process is old or new is somewhat irrelevant. What is clear is that it opens an awareness beyond the postcolonial theory of the 80s and the 90s.

**Christian Höller:** Concerning the prefix »post« in »postcolony« one could wonder (as you do yourself in the book) if history has really moved into a stage past the colonial period. What qualitative differences have occurred on the African continent that would legitimate the use of the term

»postcolony« (as opposed to, say, »ex-colony«)?

**Achille Mbembe:** As far as Africa is concerned, colonialism is over. Apartheid is over too. Africans are now the free masters of their own destiny. This is why from an intellectual and political point of view, there is no turning away from the difficult *work of freedom*. It is very risky work because it involves a transformative relation with our past as a condition *sine qua non* of our control over our own future.

Unfortunately, African criticism has been slow to awake to this new reality and its empowering possibilities. The discourse of victimization and *ressentiment* is still pervasive. In most African nativist, nationalist or Afro-Marxist discourses, history is still interpreted as an endless process of sorcery. And because history is akin to witchcraft, many feel the need to wear masks and to blame everything on the past. In the process, they forget to account for the self-destruction and self-inflicted injuries that our boundless passions have always incited - and continue to incite.

What this means is that the »post« in »postcolony« does not refer at all to the idea of a regulated transition from one form to another form or duration. We cannot think in terms of a mechanical succession of ages. But in our attempt to create an impression of continuity, we cannot refer to the present and to its actors as simply shadow puppets of something or of somebody else. In my mind, the notion of the »postcolony« refers to a timescape which is simultaneously in the process of being formed and of being dissolved through a movement that brings both the »being formed« and the »being dissolved« into collision. The term »postcolony« indicates my desire to take very seriously the intrinsic qualities and power of »contemporaneity« while firmly keeping in mind the fact that the present itself is a concatenation of multiple temporalities. Because of the entanglement of these multiple temporalities, Africa is evolving in multiple and overlapping directions simultaneously.

**Christian Höller:** In close relation to the issue of the »post-ness« of contemporary African living situations stands the specific time-model you develop with respect to the age of decolonization. How could this model of »entanglement« - that is, of multiple temporalities overlapping and superseding each other, sometimes inside each other, which is clearly non-linear - warrant the assumption that we have actually moved beyond the framework installed by the colonial regimes?

**Achille Mbembe:** To say that colonialism or apartheid is over does not mean to negate history or to erase memory. It simply means to be attentive to those signs of the times which signal the entry into other configurations of human experience, hope and possibilities, or if you wish, other temporalities. As we can clearly infer from everyday life examples, those temporalities almost always carry with them bits and pieces, traces and fragments of the past. These fragments are recycled and imbued with new meanings.

Whether in the cultural, political or symbolic realms, the African present is formed by an assemblage of signs and symbols and artefacts that mean different things in various languages and contexts. These signs, symbols and artefacts are then organised around multiple central tropes that come to function as both images and mirages, parables and allegories. As a result, because it succeeds in weaving onomatopoeic relations between the thing and its double, African cultural history is the perfect archive of resemblance. This is valid for the past and for the present.

**Christian Höller:** What is particularly striking and original about your approach is the way you theorize power or »commandment« in the »postcolony«. Concerned with »the banality of power«, you put the Bakhtinian model of the grotesque and the obscene (as possible models of resistance against the oppressor) to a quite distinctive use, in so far as these categories are exactly the modes in which power is exercised (mostly by autocrats) in African postcolonies. What kind of power constellation did, or does, this process exactly engender - for example, you talk of a »mutual

zombification« resulting from this?

**Achille Mbembe:** The book is not a reflection on power in general, but on that specific formation of will, desire and fantasy the postcolonial potentate is. This formation of will, fantasy and passions operates predominantly through the mediation of the body and the senses. It is a formation in which power is ubiquitous both in presence and in the realm of the tactile. Its language is that of *jouissance*. It appeals not to reason as a category of public life, but to sensations (the eye, the ear, the mouth, the phallus, taste, smell, a range of pleasures and pains of varying intensities). Such a power formation indeed has a historicity and a materiality as I show in chapters 1 and 2. But more importantly, it is a bundle of energies and brutal fantasies which always end up taking on lives of their own. Because of sheer coercive repetition, these fantasies end up becoming a »habitus« or at least part of the stylistics of everyday life, a prosaics.

More radically, the starkness and the brutality of these fantasies may, on occasion, assume a nightmarish appearance, as reality and fable reflect each other, thereby transforming the very identity of the original and its referents. This is why an analysis à la Foucault or a reading from within the usual categories of political economy are unable to highlight its complexities. In this kind of power formation, reality is each time erased, recreated, and duplicated. It is this power of proliferation (and its ability to obliterate the distinctions between truth and falsehood, the visible and the occult) that turns domination and subjection into a magical song, at that point where the originary arbitrariness produces terror and hilarity.

**Christian Höller:** This specific »banality of power« creates a particular closeness between ruler and ruled, a form of »conviviality« or »intimate tyranny« that goes far beyond the binarist conceptions of oppressor and oppressed, resulting in powerlessness. In which parts of Africa does this constellation still apply today, and which parts have - in what ways - moved ahead of this excess-driven intimacies of postcolonial domination?

**Achille Mbembe:** These power formations are still alive in varying degrees and qualities in those countries where the limits of democratization are the most evident: Cameroon, Togo, Gabon, Kenya, Ivory Coast, Zimbabwe, the Central African Republic, Chad, Burkina-Faso, Liberia or even Nigeria. This said, one can argue that by the end of the 90s, the political economy of statehood in Africa had dramatically changed. As countries such as South Africa moved away from the most grotesque and ugly forms of violation, other regions of the continent became engulfed in bloody processes of destruction of human bodies and populations (Congo, Angola, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Ethiopia, Erythrea, Rwanda, Burundi). In those instances, the calculus of domination ceased to be embedded in the myriad *dispositifs* of disciplinary power that had characterized the postcolonial *commandement*. After all, what was so typical of the *commandement* was the exchange between obedience and theatricality on one hand, and the redistributive imperative on the other.

Today, in many instances, the *commandement* has been replaced by a new form of sovereign power: »necropower«. Why necropower? Well, because the ultimate site of deployment of this new form of sovereignty is no longer the body as such, but the dead body of the »civilian«. Necropower is wielded both by states and by what, following Deleuze and Guattari, we should call »war machines«. War machines are made up of segments of armed men that split up, merge and superimpose each other depending on the circumstances. Polymorphous and diffuse organizations, war machines are characterized by their capacity for metamorphosis. They combine a plurality of functions and operate through capture, looting and predation.

In the context of the multiplication of war machines, technologies of destruction have become more tactile, more anatomical, in a context where the choice today is no longer between obedience and simulation but between life and death. Whether in Sierra Leone or in the Congo, it is easy to note that technologies of destruction are less concerned with inscribing bodies within disciplinary apparatuses as inscribing them, when the time comes, within the order of the maximal economy now represented by the »massacre«. We have seen how, during the war in Sierra Leone for example, physical amputation replaced immediate death, and how the cutting off limbs opened the way to the deployment of techniques of incision, ablation that had bones as their target.

**Christian Höller:** Projected transitions to democracy seem to be hunted, across the continent, by the emergence of what you call »private indirect government.« Within this new configurations of power, the privatization of violence (as evidenced in the myriad militias and private armies) and of sovereignty goes hand in hand with the »informalization« of large parts of the economy. How did this new form of domination come about and what role did international institutions such as the IMF and the World bank play in it?

**Achille Mbembe:** Democracy as a form of government and as a culture of public life does not have a future in Africa - or for that matter, elsewhere in the world - if it is not rethought precisely from the crucible of »necropower«. By »necropower«, I have in mind the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, sovereign power imagines itself and is deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of deathscapes, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead.

Let me hasten to say that this is far from being a typically African phenomenon. Deathscapes have emerged in such faraway places as Bosnia, Chechnya, Palestine, Colombia, Sri-Lanka, or Kashmir. Recent U.S.-led wars in Iraq or in the Balkans can be characterized as such. Another configuration of terror and violence is embodied in a set of economic policies fostered by international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF. The implementation of such policies in the absence of a significant reduction of African debt has led to the »spectralization« of the economies of the continent, as evidenced by the growth of casinos and gambling activities. Millions of people have been deprived of jobs, food and shelter and are now reduced to struggling for daily survival. Instead of curbing the corruption of local elites, the brutality of the international system has increased their greed and carelessness. Under the pretext of privatization, looting has become a norm as well as a cultural practice. Partial democratization under conditions of structural adjustment has opened the way for the privatization of violence.

**Christian Höller:** Under which conditions could a positive transition successfully be effected?

**Achille Mbembe:** Successful transition can only be effected under conditions of sustained economic growth and cultural *aggiornamento*. The current dilemma is how to unleash such a cycle of growth. I imagine that for this to happen, wars have to end. Internal frontiers have to be erased. Massive investments are needed in the fields of infrastructure, education and health. Transnational global connections have to be harnessed.

But economic growth alone will not be enough. It should be accompanied by a serious shift in the terms of cultural rendition of contemporary African experiences. People, images and commodities have to circulate. A continental public sphere has to be nurtured through the development of mass media and new technologies. A renewal of the virtue of intellectual curiosity has to replace the current syndrome of victimization. Bridges have to be built between a new social science and the various domains of the humanities, including philosophy, the arts, music, architecture, film and design. Such

would be some of the attributes of an Afro-cosmopolitanism firmly rooted in the continent, but mindful of the force and wealth Africa's multiple internal and external diasporas represent.

**Christian Höller:** Recently, you have spoken out against the still widespread »cult« or »neurosis of victimization« with respect to the aftermath of colonialism. What kind, if any, of cosmopolitanism could be the proper remedy against this neurosis?

**Achille Mbembe:** This is a difficult issue. We cannot evade the violent aspects of our history. We have to confront in the same breath the terror visited upon us by racial imperialism as well as our own self-inflicted brutalities. For this to happen, we have to widen the scope of cultural and political critique and renew the archives of our past and of our present.

But there is no way we will overcome the neurosis of victimization if, by transforming the past into our subjective present, we root our identities in injury alone. For the past to become a principle of action in the present, we have to manage to admit the reality of loss and stop living in the past instead of integrating it in to the present as that which must sustain human dialogue. In any case, the complete restitution of the past is not only terrifying, but also a clear impossibility.

In order to build a truly cosmopolitan culture in Africa, the present has somewhat to be liberated from the past. It should be clear that I am not advocating the erasure of the past. I am preoccupied with ways in which we can open avenues for memorial practices that foster the work of remembrance - but remembrance as part of the *work of freedom*, the ultimate ethical frontier. This cannot be achieved through black racial romanticism.

1 Achille Mbembe: *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 2001. See also the Roundtable Reviews on the H-Africa Network (<http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~africa>).

2 See Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, loc. cit., p. 66 - 101.

3 Ibid, p. 77.

4 See Achille Mbembe: *At the Edge of the World - Boundaries, Territoriality, and Sovereignty in Africa*, in: *Public Culture* 12, 1 (2000), p. 259 - 284 and the visual rendering of this »new geo-political situation in Africa« by Philippe Rekacewicz : *Mapping Concepts*. In: *Public Culture* 12, 3 (2000), S. 703 - 706.

5 See Achille Mbembe: *African Modes of Self-Writing*. In: *Public Culture* 14, 1 (2002), p. 239 - 273.

6 Ibid, p. 272 f.