

Necropolitics

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Necropolitics is a concept that originates from postcolonial theory and refers to the politics of death and the power dynamics surrounding the control and regulation of life and death. Coined by Achille Mbembe, necropolitics examines how state power and sovereignty are exercised through the management of mortality, including the deployment of violence, surveillance, and exclusionary practices that determine who lives and who dies within a society.

Keywords: postcolonial theory ; power dynamics ; Colonialism ; sovereignty ; power

1. Introduction

Necropolitics, a concept coined by Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe in his seminal work *Necropolitics* ^[1], refers to the politics of death and the exercise of power through the control and regulation of mortality. This framework provides a critical lens for examining how state power and sovereignty intersect with the management of life and death, particularly in contexts marked by violence, exclusion, and oppression. Understanding necropolitics is crucial for comprehending contemporary power dynamics and addressing the systemic injustices that perpetuate violence and inequality within society.

1.1. Theoretical Foundations

The concept of necropolitics builds upon theoretical frameworks such as biopolitics, sovereignty, and thanatopolitics. Biopolitics, developed by philosopher Michel Foucault, explores how states exercise power over populations through the regulation and management of life. Necropolitics extends this analysis by focusing on how states also exert power over death, shaping who lives and who dies within society. Sovereignty, as articulated by political theorist Carl Schmitt, refers to the supreme authority of the state to control life and death within its borders. Necropolitics examines how sovereignty is enacted through the sovereign's ability to determine who is expendable and who is protected within the political community. Thanatopolitics, a term introduced by philosopher Roberto Esposito, explores the politics of death and the ways in which death is used as a tool of domination and exclusion. Necropolitics expands upon this framework by examining the intersections of death, power, and sovereignty in the context of colonialism, racism, and other forms of structural violence.

2. Power and Sovereignty in Necropolitics

2.1. Exercise of Power Through Necropower

Necropower, a term coined by Mbembe, refers to the power to dictate who lives and who dies within society. In necropolitical regimes, state power is wielded through acts of violence and coercion that target specific populations deemed disposable or expendable. This exercise of power is often justified through narratives of security, nationalism, or racial superiority, which serve to legitimize state violence and oppression. Examples of necropower in action include state-sponsored genocide, ethnic cleansing, and militarized policing aimed at suppressing dissent and maintaining control over marginalized communities.

2.2. Sovereignty and the Politics of Death

Sovereignty, traditionally understood as the supreme authority of the state to control life and death within its borders, takes on a sinister dimension in necropolitical regimes. Rather than protecting the lives of its citizens, the sovereign state asserts its authority through the management of mortality, determining who is deemed worthy of protection and who is condemned to death. This exercise of sovereignty often entails the exclusion and marginalization of certain groups based on race, ethnicity, religion, or political affiliation, reinforcing systems of inequality and oppression.

2.3. Examples of Necropolitics in Action

Historical and contemporary examples offer insight into how necropolitics operates in practice. During the colonial era, European powers exerted necropolitical control over indigenous populations through acts of violence, displacement, and exploitation. For example, the Belgian colonial regime in Congo oversaw the brutal exploitation of Congolese labor and resources, resulting in millions of deaths from violence, disease, and starvation. Similarly, the genocide of indigenous peoples in the Americas by European colonizers exemplifies the necropolitical logic of disposability, where indigenous lives were deemed expendable in the pursuit of colonial expansion and economic gain.

In the contemporary context, necropolitics is evident in global conflicts, humanitarian crises, and state violence targeting marginalized communities. For instance, the ongoing conflict in Syria has resulted in widespread civilian casualties, displacement, and suffering, as state and non-state actors engage in indiscriminate violence against civilian populations. In regions such as Palestine, Kashmir, and Myanmar, state-sponsored violence and repression perpetuate cycles of death and destruction, targeting ethnic and religious minorities based on discriminatory policies and practices.

3. Necropolitics and Colonialism

Necropolitics is deeply intertwined with the history of colonialism, as colonial regimes systematically deployed violence and coercion to assert control over indigenous populations and extract resources from colonized territories.

3.1. Colonial Violence and Extermination

Colonialism was characterized by widespread violence and dispossession, as European powers sought to subjugate indigenous populations and assert their dominance over colonized territories. Colonial regimes employed various forms of violence, including genocide, ethnic cleansing, and forced labor, to maintain control and suppress resistance. For example, the Spanish conquest of the Americas resulted in the decimation of indigenous populations through warfare, disease, and enslavement. Similarly, the British colonization of India led to mass famines, displacement, and the exploitation of Indian labor and resources for the benefit of the colonial metropole.

3.2. Necropolitical Logic of Disposability

Central to colonialism is the necropolitical logic of disposability, where certain lives are deemed expendable in the pursuit of colonial expansion and economic gain. Indigenous populations were often relegated to the status of "bare life," stripped of their humanity and subjected to brutal forms of exploitation and violence. The disposability of indigenous lives was justified through racist ideologies that portrayed colonized peoples as inferior and unworthy of rights and protections. This necropolitical logic underpinned colonial practices such as land appropriation, forced displacement, and cultural genocide, which sought to erase indigenous cultures and identities in service of colonial hegemony.

3.3. Colonial Technologies of Power

Colonialism employed a range of technologies of power to enforce necropolitical control over colonized populations. These technologies included military force, legal systems, and surveillance mechanisms that served to monitor, regulate, and discipline indigenous peoples. For example, colonial governments established legal frameworks that legitimized the dispossession of indigenous lands and the suppression of indigenous resistance. They also deployed military forces and paramilitary groups to quell dissent and maintain order, often resorting to indiscriminate violence and reprisals against perceived threats to colonial authority.

3.4. Resistance and Resilience

Despite the pervasive influence of necropolitics, indigenous populations engaged in acts of resistance and resilience to challenge colonial domination and assert their rights to self-determination and sovereignty. Indigenous resistance movements, such as the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya and the Zapatista movement in Mexico, have challenged colonial and neo-colonial regimes, demanding justice, land rights, and political autonomy. Indigenous peoples have also employed strategies of cultural preservation and revival to reclaim their identities and resist assimilation into dominant colonial cultures. These acts of resistance and resilience demonstrate the enduring strength and resilience of indigenous communities in the face of necropolitical violence and oppression.

3.5. Legacy of Colonialism and Necropolitics

The legacy of colonialism continues to shape contemporary necropolitical regimes, particularly in postcolonial contexts marked by ongoing conflicts, displacement, and state repression. The effects of colonial violence are evident in the enduring inequalities and injustices faced by indigenous and marginalized communities, who continue to bear the brunt of necropolitical violence and oppression. Addressing the legacies of colonialism requires confronting the systemic injustices that perpetuate violence and inequality within society, including racism, capitalism, and imperialism. It also entails acknowledging the resilience and resistance of indigenous peoples and supporting efforts to decolonize systems of power and promote social justice for all.

4. Necropolitics and Contemporary Issues

In contemporary society, necropolitics manifests in various forms, including global conflicts, humanitarian crises, and state violence. In regions such as the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America, necropolitical regimes perpetuate cycles of violence and instability, resulting in widespread suffering and displacement. State violence against marginalized communities, including refugees, migrants, and people of color, reflects the necropolitical logic of disposability, where certain lives are deemed expendable in the pursuit of state interests. The rise of authoritarianism, nationalism, and xenophobia further exacerbates necropolitical dynamics, as states justify violence and repression in the name of security and order.

5. Resistance, Solidarity, and Ethics

Despite the pervasive influence of necropolitics, resistance movements and acts of solidarity offer hope for challenging oppressive regimes and promoting social justice. Grassroots movements, community organizing, and advocacy efforts play a crucial role in confronting necropolitical violence and amplifying the voices of marginalized communities. Ethical considerations also come into play in confronting necropolitical regimes, as individuals and communities grapple with questions of complicity, responsibility, and moral obligation. By centering ethics and solidarity in their activism, individuals can work towards dismantling necropolitical structures and building more inclusive and equitable societies.

References

1. Mbembe, Achille (2003). "Necropolitics". *Public Culture*. 15 (1): 11–40.

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