

BOOK REVIEWS

Translated Version

VIOLENCE AND POWER: CRITIQUE OF RACISM AND THE ANTIRACIST UTOPIA

CRÍTICA DA RAZÃO NEGRA

Achille Mbembe. São Paulo, SP: n-1 edições, 2018. 320 p.

Achille Mbembe's *Crítica da razão negra* (see *Critique of Black Reason*, for the English translation) is a provocative book. It is provocative because it challenges the readers by calling upon them to carefully reflect on each page. It is not an easy or quick read. It requires the reader to pause, to breathe, to consider, and to feel. Moreover, by calling upon the reader it causes pain, at least in those who are not insensitive to the brutal side of human experience. However, pain can be the starting point for a new stance. There is a French saying: "there is no growth without pain." If growth can be said to equal hope, then as a carrier of pain, the book is also a carrier of hope.

Mbembe, originally from Cameroon, is a professor of history and political science at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa and at Duke University in the United States. His works include the classic *De la postcolonie: Essai sur l'imagination politique dans l'Afrique contemporaine*, and he also authored *Sair da grande noite: Ensaio sobre África descolonizada* and *Necropolítica (On the poscolony, Out of the dark night and Necro-politics*, in English), both published in Portuguese. *Crítica da razão negra (Critique de la raison nègre*, in French) further reveals the weight and erudition of its author, who uses knowledge from diverse areas ranging from philosophy to post-colonial studies, drawing on history, psychoanalysis, and literature. However, despite the complexity of the analysis, the narrative is engaging delivered in poetic prose.

The introduction, titled "The becoming-black of the world," invites the reader into the book while situating its socio-historical context. During the period described, Europe has ceased to be the international "center of gravity" in a world now characterized by the globalization of markets, privatization, and increasingly complex financial and economic systems, the military apparatus, and informational devices. This stage of capitalism—where there are no longer workers but only entrepreneurs of the self (Foucault's expression), and where the drama of the subalternized is no longer its exploitation by capital but its relegation to the status of so much useless flesh, and where profit generation is useless (I'm not sure if this phrase translated what I meant. An alternative: ... the subaltern's drama is no longer that of being exploited by capital, but that of being relegated to a superfluous humanity, without any use for the production of profit) —signals the universalization of the black condition. For the first time in human history, "black subject" refers not only to peoples of African origin but to all vulnerable bodies manufactured on a worldwide scale by neoliberal and security policies, new wars of occupation and predation, and zoning practices.

Six linked chapters deliver a central message: blacks and Africa were the object of and stage for violence that revealed the bestiality of Western civilization. Nevertheless, black people also have power. This ambivalence is expressed in the scrutiny to which the term black reason, an ambiguous term that designates multiple things simultaneously, is subject. It consists of a set of knowledge, statements, and nonsense, whose object is "the thing itself"



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or people of African origin. Since its origins, it has been a fabled activity, aiming at inventing stories and composing images. Several mediators took part in its construction: erudite societies, universal exhibitions, museums, and amateur collections of “primitive art.” Therefore, it is a divergent, contradictory, and changing constellation of discourses and practices of texts and rituals, which sometimes portray black people as savages subject to moral disqualification and practical instrumentalization. Black reason is the western conscience of black people, and then it is violence (D’ont you think that violence sounds better, because I have used it in the title?).

However, it is more than that. It is also a gesture of self-determination, a mode of presence, a utopia. Through it, black people describe themselves as beings who cannot be dominated, who are not where they claim to be, nor where they are sought, but only where they are not thought of (Consider this: Through it, black people describe themselves as beings who cannot be dominated, who are not where they are said to be, nor where they are sought, but only where they are not thought of) Rewriting history is a moral act of based on vestiges mobilized to account for the fragmented experiences of a people scattered worldwide who are struggling to define themselves not a silly composite but “as a community whose blood stains are visible on the entire surface of modernity.” (Consider this: Black reason is a moral act of rewriting history based on vestiges mobilized to account for the fragmented experiences of a people scattered worldwide who are struggling to define themselves not as a silly composite but “as a community whose blood stains are visible on the entire surface of modernity).

A definition of black reason is needed that (considers) their freedom to choose, their search for emancipation, and the transition from slave to ordinary citizen. Therefore, black reason is also the black consciousness of black people and, thus, it is power (D’ont you think that power sounds better, because I have used it in the title?).

These two versions of the same plot intertwine in a complex way. The second definition reveals traces of the first, sometimes expressed as a short-sighted demand for absolute rupture or in cunning reproduction. Consequently, to debate black reason is to think about the set of disputes over the rules for defining the black person. New ways of imagining black identity can emerge from these disputes, recycling violence into power. For example, Mbembe states, “A ‘black person’ is one who, trapped against a wall without a door, still believes that everything will eventually open.” But the narrative does not backslide into the weak discourse around resilience as the single solution for structural inequalities.

It does not propose to turn the page, as so hastily recommended by those who resist facing the wounds of humanity, the “injuries and deep marks.” Mbembe argues that, for the most part, “history has been a process of getting used to the death of the other —slow death, death by asphyxiation, sudden death, assigned death.” The proposed critique does not follow linearities; it is dialectical: it stresses that “a body needs to be able to move,” that it “is made, first of all, to move.”

For all these reasons, the black-power or the black as power carries a message of hope. Although Mbembe states that the colonizer is brutalized through his own brutality, he bets on a global universalism. This is expressed in the utopian possibility “of each human being and each people to rise, to walk with their own feet, to write with their hands, face, and body their own work, their own part of the history of the world that we all share and in which we are all interested parties and heirs.” The bet is not at all naive. It does not subscribe to the idea that we live in a post-racial era, nor does it suggest a unique path to counter racism. When questioning which rights black people should continue to fight for, Mbembe states: “Everything depends on the place where they are, the historical context in which they live, and the objective conditions that are presented to them.” He adds: “Everything also depends on the nature of the racial formations within which they exist.”

Mbembe offer reads powerful questions: “Whatever the places, the times, and the contexts, the horizon of these struggles remains the same: how can we fully belong to this common world? [...] How to take part in the building and sharing of the world?” He warns that the fight must be conducted not separately but in solidarity with all humanity, and the fight must strive to reconcile its multiple facets. Mbembe takes this even further arguing, “There is only one world, at least for now. [...] It is a whole made up of a thousand parts. From all over the world. From all worlds.” Sharing the world with other living beings (animals, plants, molecules, deities, materials, objects, the earth that trembles, the volcanoes that light, the winds and storms, the waters that rise, the sun that shines and burns), among which humanity is in a unique, but at the same time fragile, vulnerable, and partial position: this is the debt par excellence. This is, above all, the key to the durability of both humans and non-humans.

May so-called Western civilization, beset by so many and such different crises (economic, but also social, environmental, above all moral and, why not say spiritual) hear this message and thus launch itself into a critique of white reason. Perhaps then we can make our most ambitious utopias real.

AUTHOR’ CONTRIBUTIONS

The author declare that they participated in all stages of development of the manuscript. From the conceptualization and theoretical-methodological approach, the theoretical review (literature survey), and finally, writing and final review.