

---

# Necropolitics

*Achille Mbembe*

*Translated by Libby Meintjes*

*Wa syo' lukasa pebwe  
Umwime wa pita  
[He left his footprint on the stone  
He himself passed on]  
Lamba proverb, Zambia*

This essay assumes 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.<sup>1</sup> Hence, to kill or to allow to live constitute the limits of sovereignty, its

This essay is the result of sustained conversations with Arjun Appadurai, Carol Breckenridge, and Françoise Vergès. Excerpts were presented at seminars and workshops in Evanston, Chicago, New York, New Haven, and Johannesburg. Useful criticisms were provided by Paul Gilroy, Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, Beth Povinelli, Ben Lee, Charles Taylor, Crawford Young, Abdoumalig Simone, Luc Sindjoun, Souleymane Bachir Diagne, Carlos Forment, Ato Quayson, Ulrike Kistner, David Theo Goldberg, and Deborah Posel. Additional comments and insights as well as critical support and encouragement were offered by Rehana Ebr-Vally and Sarah Nuttall. The essay is dedicated to my late friend Tshikala Kayembe Biaya.

1. The essay distances itself from traditional accounts of sovereignty found in the discipline of political science and the subdiscipline of international relations. For the most part, these accounts locate sovereignty within the boundaries of the nation-state, within institutions empowered by the state, or within supranational institutions and networks. See, for example, *Sovereignty at the Millennium*, special issue, *Political Studies* 47 (1999). My own approach builds on Michel Foucault's critique of the notion of sovereignty and its relation to war and biopower in *Il faut défendre la société: Cours au Collège de France, 1975–1976* (Paris: Seuil, 1997), 37–55, 75–100, 125–48, 213–44. See also Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer. Le pouvoir souverain et la vie nue* (Paris: Seuil, 1997), 23–80.

*Public Culture* 15(1): 11–40

Copyright © 2003 by Duke University Press

fundamental attributes. To exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power.

One could summarize in the above terms what Michel Foucault meant by *biopower*: that domain of life over which power has taken control.<sup>2</sup> But 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 person who is thus put to death and about the relation of enmity that sets that person against his or her murderer? Is the notion of biopower sufficient to 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? War, after all, is as much a means of achieving sovereignty as a way of exercising the right to kill. Imagining politics as a form of war, we must ask: What place is given to life, death, and the human body (in particular the wounded or slain body)? How are they inscribed in the order of power?

### Politics, the Work of Death, and the “Becoming Subject”

In order to answer these questions, this essay draws on the concept of biopower and explores its relation to notions of sovereignty (*imperium*) and the state of exception.<sup>3</sup> Such an analysis raises a number of empirical and philosophical questions I would like to examine briefly. As is well known, the concept of the state of exception has been often discussed in relation to Nazism, totalitarianism, and the concentration/extermination camps. The death camps in particular have been interpreted variously as the central metaphor for sovereign and destructive violence and as the ultimate sign of the absolute power of the negative. Says Hannah Arendt: “There are no parallels to the life in the concentration camps. Its horror can never be fully embraced by the imagination for the very reason that it stands outside of life and death.”<sup>4</sup> Because its inhabitants are divested of political status and reduced to bare life, the camp is, for Giorgio Agamben, “the place in which the most absolute *conditio inhumana* ever to appear on Earth was realized.”<sup>5</sup> In the political-judicial structure of the camp, he adds, the state of exception ceases to be a temporal sus-

2. Foucault, *Il faut défendre la société*, 213–34.

3. On the state of exception, see Carl Schmitt, *La dictature*, trans. Mira Köller and Dominique Séglerd (Paris: Seuil, 2000), 210–28, 235–36, 250–51, 255–56; *La notion de politique. Théorie du partisan*, trans. Marie-Louise Steinhauser (Paris: Flammarion, 1992).

4. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harvest, 1966), 444.

5. Giorgio Agamben, *Moyens sans fins. Notes sur la politique* (Paris: Payot & Rivages, 1995), 50–51.

pension of the state of law. According to Agamben, it acquires a permanent spatial arrangement that remains continually outside the normal state of law.

The aim of this essay is not to debate the singularity of the extermination of the Jews or to hold it up by way of example.<sup>6</sup> I start from the idea that modernity was at the origin of multiple concepts of sovereignty—and therefore of the biopolitical. Disregarding this multiplicity, late-modern political criticism has unfortunately privileged normative theories of democracy and has made the concept of reason one of the most important elements of both the project of modernity and of the topos of sovereignty.<sup>7</sup> From this perspective, the ultimate expression of sovereignty is the production of general norms by a body (the demos) made up of free and equal men and women. These men and women are posited as full subjects capable of self-understanding, self-consciousness, and self-representation. Politics, therefore, is defined as twofold: a project of autonomy and the achieving of agreement among a collectivity through communication and recognition. This, we are told, is what differentiates it from war.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, it is on the basis of a distinction between reason and unreason (passion, fantasy) that late-modern criticism has been able to articulate a certain idea of the political, the community, the subject—or, more fundamentally, of what the good life is all about, how to achieve it, and, in the process, to become a fully moral agent. Within this paradigm, reason is the truth of the subject and politics is the exercise of reason in the public sphere. The exercise of reason is tantamount to the exercise of freedom, a key element for individual autonomy. The romance of sovereignty, in this case, rests on the belief that the subject is the master and the controlling author of his or her own meaning. Sovereignty is therefore defined as a twofold process of *self-institution* and *self-limitation* (fixing one's own limits for oneself). The exercise of sovereignty, in turn, consists in society's capacity for self-creation through recourse to institutions inspired by specific social and imaginary significations.<sup>9</sup>

This strongly normative reading of the politics of sovereignty has been the

6. On these debates, see Saul Friedlander, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); and, more recently, Bertrand Ogilvie, "Comparer l'incomparable," *Multitudes*, no. 7 (2001): 130–66.

7. See James Bohman and William Rehg, eds., *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997); Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996).

8. James Schmidt, ed., *What Is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

9. Cornelius Castoriadis, *L'institution imaginaire de la société* (Paris: Seuil, 1975) and *Figures du pensable* (Paris: Seuil, 1999).

object of numerous critiques, which I will not rehearse here.<sup>10</sup> My concern is those figures of sovereignty whose central project is not the struggle for autonomy but *the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations*. Such figures of sovereignty are far from a piece of prodigious insanity or an expression of a rupture between the impulses and interests of the body and those of the mind. Indeed, they, like the death camps, are what constitute the *nomos* of the political space in which we still live. Furthermore, contemporary experiences of human destruction suggest that it is possible to develop a reading of politics, sovereignty, and the subject different from the one we inherited from the philosophical discourse of modernity. Instead of considering reason as the truth of the subject, we can look to other foundational categories that are less abstract and more tactile, such as life and death.

Significant for such a project is Hegel's discussion of the relation between death and the "becoming subject." Hegel's account of death centers on a bipartite concept of negativity. First, the human negates nature (a negation exteriorized in the human's effort to reduce nature to his or her own needs); and second, he or she transforms the negated element through work and struggle. In transforming nature, the human being creates a world; but in the process, he or she also is exposed to his or her own negativity. Within the Hegelian paradigm, human death is essentially voluntary. It is the result of risks consciously assumed by the subject. According to Hegel, in these risks the "animal" that constitutes the human subject's natural being is defeated.

In other words, the human being truly *becomes a subject*—that is, separated from the animal—in the struggle and the work through which he or she confronts death (understood as the violence of negativity). It is through this confrontation with death that he or she is cast into the incessant movement of history. Becoming subject therefore supposes upholding the work of death. To uphold the work of death is precisely how Hegel defines the life of the Spirit. The life of the Spirit, he says, is not that life which is frightened of death, and spares itself destruction, but that life which assumes death and lives with it. Spirit attains its truth only by finding itself in absolute dismemberment.<sup>11</sup> Politics is therefore

10. See, in particular, Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), especially chap. 2.

11. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phénoménologie de l'esprit*, trans. J. P. Lefebvre (Paris: Aubier, 1991). See also the critique by Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), especially Appendix II, "L'idée de la mort dans la philosophie de Hegel"; and Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes XII* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), especially "Hegel, la mort et le sacrifice," 326–48, and "Hegel, l'homme et l'histoire," 349–69.

death that lives a human life. Such, too, is the definition of absolute knowledge and sovereignty: risking the entirety of one's life.

Georges Bataille also offers critical insights into how death structures the idea of sovereignty, the political, and the subject. Bataille displaces Hegel's conception of the linkages between death, sovereignty, and the subject in at least three ways. First, he interprets death and sovereignty as the paroxysm of exchange and superabundance—or, to use his own terminology: *excess*. For Bataille, life is defective only when death has taken it hostage. Life itself exists only in bursts and in exchange with death.<sup>12</sup> He argues that death is the putrefaction of life, the stench that is at once the source and the repulsive condition of life. Therefore, although it destroys what was to be, obliterates what was supposed to continue being, and reduces to nothing the individual who takes it, death does not come down to the pure annihilation of being. Rather, it is essentially self-consciousness; moreover, it is the most luxurious form of life, that is, of effusion and exuberance: a power of proliferation. Even more radically, Bataille withdraws death from the horizon of meaning. This is in contrast to Hegel, for whom nothing is definitively lost in death; indeed, death is seen as holding great signification as a means to truth.

Second, Bataille firmly anchors death in the realm of *absolute expenditure* (the other characteristic of sovereignty), whereas Hegel tries to keep death within the economy of absolute knowledge and meaning. Life beyond utility, says Bataille, is the domain of sovereignty. This being the case, death is therefore the point at which destruction, suppression, and sacrifice constitute so irreversible and radical an expenditure—an expenditure without reserve—that they can no longer be determined as negativity. Death is therefore the very principle of excess—an *anti-economy*. Hence the metaphor of luxury and of *the luxurious character of death*.

Third, Bataille establishes a correlation among death, sovereignty, and sexuality. Sexuality is inextricably linked to violence and to the dissolution of the boundaries of the body and self by way of orgiastic and excremental impulses. As such, sexuality concerns two major forms of polarized human impulses—excretion and appropriation—as well as the regime of the taboos surrounding them.<sup>13</sup> The truth of sex and its deadly attributes reside in the experience of loss of the boundaries separating reality, events, and fantasized objects.

12. See Jean Baudrillard, "Death in Bataille," in *Bataille: A Critical Reader*, ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), especially 139–41.

13. Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, trans. A. Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 94–95.

For Bataille, sovereignty therefore has many forms. But ultimately it is the refusal to accept the limits that the fear of death would have the subject respect. The sovereign world, Bataille argues, “is the world in which the limit of death is done away with. Death is present in it, its presence defines that world of violence, but while death is present it is always there only to be negated, never for anything but that. The sovereign,” he concludes, “is he who is, as if death were not. . . . He has no more regard for the limits of identity than he does for limits of death, or rather these limits are the same; he is the transgression of all such limits.” Since the natural domain of prohibitions includes death, among others (e.g., sexuality, filth, excrement), sovereignty requires “the strength to violate the prohibition against killing, although it’s true this will be under the conditions that customs define.” And contrary to subordination that is always rooted in necessity and the alleged need to avoid death, sovereignty definitely calls for the risk of death.<sup>14</sup>

By treating sovereignty as the violation of prohibitions, Bataille reopens the question of the limits of the political. Politics, in this case, is not the forward dialectical movement of reason. Politics can only be traced as a spiral transgression, as that difference that disorients the very idea of the limit. More specifically, politics is the difference put into play by the violation of a taboo.<sup>15</sup>

### Biopower and the Relation of Enmity

Having presented a reading of politics as the work of death, I turn now to sovereignty, expressed predominantly as the right to kill. For the purpose of my argument, I relate Foucault’s notion of biopower to two other concepts: the state of exception and the state of siege.<sup>16</sup> I examine those trajectories by which the state of exception and the relation of enmity have become the normative basis of the right to kill. In such instances, power (and not necessarily state power) continuously refers and appeals to exception, emergency, and a fictionalized notion of the enemy. It also labors to produce that same exception, emergency, and fictionalized enemy. In other words, the question is: What is the relationship between politics and death in those systems that can function only in a state of emergency?

In Foucault’s formulation of it, biopower appears to function through dividing

14. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, eds., *The Bataille Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 318–19. See also Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, vol. 1, *Consumption*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone, 1988), and *Erotism: Death & Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights, 1986).

15. Bataille, *Accursed Share*, vol. 2, *The History of Eroticism*; vol. 3, *Sovereignty*.

16. On the state of siege, see Schmitt, *La dictature*, chap. 6.

people into those who must live and those who must die. Operating on the basis of a split between the living and the dead, such a power defines itself in relation to a biological field—which it takes control of and vests itself in. This control presupposes the distribution of human species into groups, the subdivision of the population into subgroups, and the establishment of a biological caesura between the ones and the others. This is what Foucault labels with the (at first sight familiar) term *racism*.<sup>17</sup>

That *race* (or for that matter *racism*) figures so prominently in the calculus of biopower is entirely justifiable. After all, more so than class-thinking (the ideology that defines history as an economic struggle of classes), race has been the ever present shadow in Western political thought and practice, especially when it comes to imagining the inhumanity of, or rule over, foreign peoples. Referring to both this ever-presence and the phantomlike world of race in general, Arendt locates their roots in the shattering experience of otherness and suggests that the politics of race is ultimately linked to the politics of death.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, in Foucault's terms, racism is above all a technology aimed at permitting the exercise of biopower, "that old sovereign right of death."<sup>19</sup> In the economy of biopower, the function of racism is to regulate the distribution of death and to make possible the murderous functions of the state. It is, he says, "the condition for the acceptability of putting to death."<sup>20</sup>

Foucault states clearly that the sovereign right to kill (*droit de glaive*) and the mechanisms of biopower are inscribed in the way all modern states function;<sup>21</sup> indeed, they can be seen as constitutive elements of state power in modernity. According to Foucault, the Nazi state was the most complete example of a state exercising the right to kill. This state, he claims, made the management, protection, and cultivation of life coextensive with the sovereign right to kill. By biological extrapolation on the theme of the political enemy, in organizing the war against its adversaries and, at the same time, exposing its own citizens to war, the Nazi state is seen as having opened the way for a formidable consolidation of the right to kill, which culminated in the project of the "final solution." In doing so, it became the archetype of a power formation that combined the characteristics of the racist state, the murderous state, and the suicidal state.

17. See Foucault, *Il faut défendre la société*, 57–74.

18. "Race is, politically speaking, not the beginning of humanity but its end . . . , not the natural birth of man but his unnatural death." Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 157.

19. Foucault, *Il faut défendre la société*, 214.

20. Foucault, *Il faut défendre la société*, 228.

21. Foucault, *Il faut défendre la société*, 227–32.

It has been argued that the complete conflation of war and politics (and racism, homicide, and suicide), until they are indistinguishable from one another, is unique to the Nazi state. The perception of the existence of the Other as an attempt on my life, as a mortal threat or absolute danger whose biophysical elimination would strengthen my potential to life and security—this, I suggest, is one of the many imaginaries of sovereignty characteristic of both early and late modernity itself. Recognition of this perception to a large extent underpins most traditional critiques of modernity, whether they are dealing with nihilism and its proclamation of the will for power as the essence of the being; with reification understood as the *becoming-object* of the human being; or the subordination of everything to impersonal logic and to the reign of calculability and instrumental rationality.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, from an anthropological perspective, what these critiques implicitly contest is a definition of politics as the warlike relation par excellence. They also challenge the idea that, of necessity, the calculus of life passes through the death of the Other; or that sovereignty consists of the will and the capacity to kill in order to live.

Taking a historical perspective, a number of analysts have argued that the material premises of Nazi extermination are to be found in colonial imperialism on the one hand and, on the other, in the serialization of technical mechanisms for putting people to death—mechanisms developed between the Industrial Revolution and the First World War. According to Enzo Traverso, the gas chambers and the ovens were the culmination of a long process of dehumanizing and industrializing death, one of the original features of which was to integrate instrumental rationality with the productive and administrative rationality of the modern Western world (the factory, the bureaucracy, the prison, the army). Having become mechanized, serialized execution was transformed into a purely technical, impersonal, silent, and rapid procedure. This development was aided in part by racist stereotypes and the flourishing of a class-based racism that, in translating the social conflicts of the industrial world in racial terms, ended up comparing the working classes and “stateless people” of the industrial world to the “savages” of the colonial world.<sup>23</sup>

In reality, the links between modernity and terror spring from multiple sources. Some are to be found in the political practices of the ancien régime. From this perspective, the tension between the public’s passion for blood and notions of jus-

22. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), especially chaps. 3, 5, 6.

23. Enzo Traverso, *La violence nazie: Une généalogie européenne* (Paris: La Fabrique Editions, 2002).



tice and revenge is critical. Foucault shows in *Discipline and Punish* how the execution of the would-be regicide Damiens went on for hours, much to the satisfaction of the crowd.<sup>24</sup> Well known is the long procession of the condemned through the streets prior to execution, the parade of body parts—a ritual that became a standard feature of popular violence—and the final display of a severed head mounted on a pike. In France, the advent of the guillotine marks a new phase in the “democratization” of the means of disposing of the enemies of the state. Indeed, this form of execution that had once been the prerogative of the nobility is extended to all citizens. In a context in which decapitation is viewed as less demeaning than hanging, innovations in the technologies of murder aim not only at “civilizing” the ways of killing. They also aim at disposing of a large number of victims in a relatively short span of time. At the same time, a new cultural sensibility emerges in which killing the enemy of the state is an extension of play. More intimate, lurid, and leisurely forms of cruelty appear.

But nowhere is the conflation of reason and terror so manifest as during the French Revolution.<sup>25</sup> During the French Revolution, terror is construed as an almost necessary part of politics. An absolute transparency is claimed to exist between the state and the people. As a political category, “the people” is gradually displaced from concrete reality to rhetorical figure. As David Bates has shown, the theorists of terror believe it possible to distinguish between authentic expressions of sovereignty and the actions of the enemy. They also believe it possible to distinguish between the “error” of the citizen and the “crime” of the counterrevolutionary in the political sphere. Terror thus becomes a way of marking aberration in the body politic, and politics is read both as the mobile force of reason and as the errant attempt at creating a space where “error” would be reduced, truth enhanced, and the enemy disposed of.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, terror is not linked solely to the utopian belief in the unfettered power of human reason. It is also clearly related to various narratives of mastery and emancipation, most of which are underpinned by Enlightenment understandings of truth and error, the “real” and the symbolic. Marx, for example, conflates labor (the endless cycle of production and consumption required for the maintenance of human life) with work (the creation of lasting artifacts that add to the world of things). Labor is viewed as the vehicle for the historical self-creation of humankind.

24. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon, 1977).

25. See Robert Wokler, “Contextualizing Hegel’s Phenomenology of the French Revolution and the Terror,” *Political Theory* 26 (1998): 33–55.

26. David W. Bates, *Enlightenment Aberrations: Error and Revolution in France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002), chap. 6.

The historical self-creation of humankind is itself a life-and-death conflict, that is, a conflict over what paths should lead to the truth of history: the overcoming of capitalism and the commodity form and the contradictions associated with both. According to Marx, with the advent of communism and the abolition of exchange relations, things will appear as they really are; the “real” will present itself as it actually is, and the distinction between subject and object or being and consciousness will be transcended.<sup>27</sup> But by making human emancipation dependent upon the abolition of commodity production, Marx blurs the all-important divisions among the man-made realm of freedom, the nature-determined realm of necessity, and the contingent in history.

The commitment to the abolition of commodity production and the dream of direct and unmediated access to the “real” make these processes—the fulfillment of the so-called logic of history and the fabrication of humankind—almost necessarily violent processes. As shown by Stephen Louw, the central tenets of classical Marxism leave no choice but to “try to introduce communism by administrative fiat, which, in practice, means that social relations must be decommodified forcefully.”<sup>28</sup> Historically, these attempts have taken such forms as labor militarization, the collapse of the distinction between state and society, and revolutionary terror.<sup>29</sup> It may be argued that they aimed at the eradication of the basic human condition of plurality. Indeed, the overcoming of class divisions, the withering away of the state, the flowering of a truly general will presuppose a view of human plurality as the chief obstacle to the eventual realization of a predetermined telos of history. In other words, the subject of Marxian modernity is, fundamentally, a subject who is intent on proving his or her sovereignty through the staging of a fight to the death. Just as with Hegel, the narrative of mastery and emancipation here is clearly linked to a narrative of truth and death. Terror and killing become the means of realizing the already known telos of history.

27. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 3 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1984), 817. See also *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1986), 172.

28. Stephen Louw, “In the Shadow of the Pharaohs: The Militarization of Labour Debate and Classical Marxist Theory,” *Economy and Society* (29) 2000: 240.

29. On labor militarization and the transition to communism, see Nikolai Bukharin, *The Politics and Economics of the Transition Period*, trans. Oliver Field (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979); and Leon Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism: A Reply to Karl Kautsky* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961). On the collapse of the distinction between state and society, see Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France* (Moscow: Progress, 1972); and Vladimir Il’ich Lenin, *Selected Works in Three Volumes*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Progress, 1977). For a critique of “revolutionary terror,” see Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror: An Essay on the Communist Problem*, trans. John O’Neill (Boston: Beacon, 1969). For a more recent example of “revolutionary terror,” see Steve J. Stern, ed., *Shining and Other Paths: War and Society in Peru, 1980–1995* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998).

Any historical account of the rise of modern terror needs to address slavery, which could be considered one of the first instances of biopolitical experimentation. In many respects, the very structure of the plantation system and its aftermath manifests the emblematic and paradoxical figure of the state of exception.<sup>30</sup> This figure is paradoxical here for two reasons. First, in the context of the plantation, the humanity of the slave appears as the perfect figure of a shadow. Indeed, the slave condition results from a triple loss: loss of a “home,” loss of rights over his or her body, and loss of political status. This triple loss is identical with absolute domination, natal alienation, and social death (expulsion from humanity altogether). To be sure, as a political-juridical structure, the plantation is a space where the slave belongs to a master. It is not a community if only because by definition, a community implies the exercise of the power of speech and thought. As Paul Gilroy says, “The extreme patterns of communication defined by the institution of plantation slavery dictate that we recognize the anti-discursive and extralinguistic ramifications of power at work in shaping communicative acts. There may, after all, be no reciprocity on the plantation outside of the possibilities of rebellion and suicide, flight and silent mourning, and there is certainly no grammatical unity of speech to mediate communicative reason. In many respects, the plantation inhabitants live non-synchronously.”<sup>31</sup> As an instrument of labor, the slave has a price. As a property, he or she has a value. His or her labor is needed and used. The slave is therefore kept alive but in a *state of injury*, in a phantom-like world of horrors and intense cruelty and profanity. The violent tenor of the slave’s life is manifested through the overseer’s disposition to behave in a cruel and intemperate manner and in the spectacle of pain inflicted on the slave’s body.<sup>32</sup> Violence, here, becomes an element in manners,<sup>33</sup> like whipping or taking of the slave’s life itself: an act of caprice and pure destruction aimed at instilling terror.<sup>34</sup> Slave life, in many ways, is a form of death-in-life. As Susan Buck-

30. See Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); and Manuel Moreno Fraginals, *The Sugar Mill: The Socioeconomic Complex of Sugar in Cuba, 1760–1860* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1976).

31. Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 57.

32. See Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, ed. Houston A. Baker (New York: Penguin, 1986).

33. The term *manners* is used here to denote the links between *social grace* and *social control*. According to Norbert Elias, manners embody what is “considered socially acceptable behavior,” the “precepts on conduct,” and the framework for “conviviality.” *The History of Manners*, vol. 1, *The Civilizing Process*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Pantheon, 1978), chap. 2.

34. “The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran faster, there he whipped longest, says Douglass in his narration of the whipping of his aunt by Mr. Plummer. He

Morss has suggested, the slave condition produces a contradiction between freedom of property and freedom of person. An unequal relationship is established along with the inequality of the power over life. This power over the life of another takes the form of commerce: a person's humanity is dissolved to the point where it becomes possible to say that the slave's life is possessed by the master.<sup>35</sup> Because the slave's life is like a "thing," possessed by another person, the slave existence appears as a perfect figure of a shadow.

In spite of the terror and the symbolic sealing off of the slave, he or she maintains alternative perspectives toward time, work, and self. This is the second paradoxical element of the plantation world as a manifestation of the state of exception. Treated as if he or she no longer existed except as a mere tool and instrument of production, the slave nevertheless is able to draw almost any object, instrument, language, or gesture into a performance and then stylize it. Breaking with uprootedness and the pure world of things of which he or she is but a fragment, the slave is able to demonstrate the protean capabilities of the human bond through music and the very body that was supposedly possessed by another.<sup>36</sup>

If the relations between life and death, the politics of cruelty, and the symbolics of profanity are blurred in the plantation system, it is notably in the colony and under the apartheid regime that there comes into being a peculiar terror formation I will now turn to.<sup>37</sup> The most original feature of this terror formation is its concatenation of biopower, the state of exception, and the state of siege. Crucial to this concatenation is, once again, race.<sup>38</sup> In fact, in most instances, the

---

would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue, would he cease to swing the blood-clotted cowskin. . . . It was a most terrible spectacle." Douglass, *Narrative of the Life*, 51. On the random killing of slaves, see 67–68.

35. Susan Buck-Morss, "Hegel and Haiti," *Critical Inquiry* 26 (2000): 821–66.

36. Roger D. Abrahams, *Singing the Master: The Emergence of African American Culture in the Plantation South* (New York: Pantheon, 1992).

37. In what follows I am mindful of the fact that colonial forms of sovereignty were always fragmented. They were complex, "less concerned with legitimizing their own presence and more excessively violent than their European forms." As importantly, "European states never aimed at governing the colonial territories with the same uniformity and intensity as was applied to their own populations." T. B. Hansen and Finn Stepputat, "Sovereign Bodies: Citizens, Migrants and States in the Post-colonial World" (paper, 2002).

38. In *The Racial State* (Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 2002), David Theo Goldberg argues that from the nineteenth century on, there are at least two historically competing traditions of racial rationalization: naturism (based on an inferiority claim) and historicism (based on the claim of the historical "immaturity"—and therefore "educability"—of the natives). In a private communication (23 August 2002), he argues that these two traditions played out differently when it came to issues of sovereignty, states of exception, and forms of necropower. In his view, necropower can take multiple forms: the terror of actual death; or a more "benevolent" form—the result of which is the destruction of a culture in order to "save the people" from themselves.

selection of races, the prohibition of mixed marriages, forced sterilization, even the extermination of vanquished peoples are to find their first testing ground in the colonial world. Here we see the first syntheses between massacre and bureaucracy, that incarnation of Western rationality.<sup>39</sup> Arendt develops the thesis that there is a link between national-socialism and traditional imperialism. According to her, the colonial conquest revealed a potential for violence previously unknown. What one witnesses in World War II is the extension to the “civilized” peoples of Europe of the methods previously reserved for the “savages.”

That the technologies which ended up producing Nazism should have originated in the plantation or in the colony or that, on the contrary—Foucault’s thesis—Nazism and Stalinism did no more than amplify a series of mechanisms that already existed in Western European social and political formations (subjugation of the body, health regulations, social Darwinism, eugenics, medico-legal theories on heredity, degeneration, and race) is, in the end, irrelevant. A fact remains, though: in modern philosophical thought and European political practice and imaginary, the colony represents the site where sovereignty consists fundamentally in the exercise of a power outside the law (*ab legibus solutus*) and where “peace” is more likely to take on the face of a “war without end.”

Indeed, such a view corresponds to Carl Schmitt’s definition of sovereignty at the beginning of the twentieth century, namely, the power to decide on the state of exception. To properly assess the efficacy of the colony as a formation of terror, we need to take a detour into the European imaginary itself as it relates to the critical issue of the domestication of war and the creation of a European juridical order (*Jus publicum Europaeum*). At the basis of this order were two key principles. The first postulated the juridical equality of all states. This equality was notably applied to *the right to wage war* (the taking of life). The right to war meant two things. On the one hand, to kill or to conclude peace was recognized as one of the preeminent functions of any state. It went hand in hand with the recognition of the fact that no state could make claims to rule outside of its borders. But conversely, the state could recognize no authority above it within its own borders. On the other hand, the state, for its part, undertook to “civilize” the ways of killing and to attribute rational objectives to the very act of killing.

The second principle related to the territorialization of the sovereign state, that is, to the determination of its frontiers within the context of a newly imposed global order. In this context, the *Jus publicum* rapidly assumed the form of a distinction between, on the one hand, those parts of the globe available for colonial

39. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 185–221.

appropriation and, on the other, Europe itself (where the *Jus publicum* was to hold sway).<sup>40</sup> This distinction, as we will see, is crucial in terms of assessing the efficacy of the colony as a terror formation. Under *Jus publicum*, a legitimate war is, to a large extent, a war conducted by one state against another or, more precisely, a war between “civilized” states. The centrality of the state in the calculus of war derives from the fact that the state is the model of political unity, a principle of rational organization, the embodiment of the idea of the universal, and a moral sign.

In the same context, colonies are similar to the frontiers. They are inhabited by “savages.” The colonies are not organized in a state form and have not created a human world. Their armies do not form a distinct entity, and their wars are not wars between regular armies. They do not imply the mobilization of sovereign subjects (citizens) who respect each other as enemies. They do not establish a distinction between combatants and noncombatants, or again between an “enemy” and a “criminal.”<sup>41</sup> It is thus impossible to conclude peace with them. In sum, colonies are zones in which war and disorder, internal and external figures of the political, stand side by side or alternate with each other. As such, the colonies are the location par excellence where the controls and guarantees of judicial order can be suspended—the zone where the violence of the state of exception is deemed to operate in the service of “civilization.”

That colonies might be ruled over in absolute lawlessness stems from the racial denial of any common bond between the conqueror and the native. In the eyes of the conqueror, *savage life* is just another form of *animal life*, a horrifying experience, something alien beyond imagination or comprehension. In fact, according to Arendt, what makes the savages different from other human beings is less the color of their skin than the fear that they behave like a part of nature, that they treat nature as their undisputed master. Nature thus remains, in all its majesty, an overwhelming reality compared to which they appear to be phantoms, unreal and ghostlike. The savages are, as it were, “natural” human beings who lack the specifically human character, the specifically human reality, “so that when European men massacred them they somehow were not aware that they had committed murder.”<sup>42</sup>

40. Etienne Balibar, “Prolégomènes à la souveraineté: La frontière, l’Etat, le peuple,” *Les temps modernes* 610 (2000): 54–55.

41. Eugene Victor Walter, *Terror and Resistance: A Study of Political Violence with Case Studies of Some Primitive African Communities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).

42. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 192.

For all the above reasons, the sovereign right to kill is not subject to any rule in the colonies. In the colonies, the sovereign might kill at any time or in any manner. Colonial warfare is not subject to legal and institutional rules. It is not a legally codified activity. Instead, colonial terror constantly intertwines with colonially generated fantasies of wilderness and death and fictions to create the effect of the real.<sup>43</sup> Peace is not necessarily the natural outcome of a colonial war. In fact, the distinction between war and peace does not avail. Colonial wars are conceived of as the expression of an absolute hostility that sets the conqueror against an absolute enemy.<sup>44</sup> All manifestations of war and hostility that had been marginalized by a European legal imaginary find a place to reemerge in the colonies. Here, the fiction of a distinction between “the ends of war” and the “means of war” collapses; so does the fiction that war functions as a rule-governed contest, as opposed to pure slaughter without risk or instrumental justification. It becomes futile, therefore, to attempt to resolve one of the intractable paradoxes of war well captured by Alexandre Kojève in his reinterpretation of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of the Spirit*: its simultaneous idealism and apparent inhumanity.<sup>45</sup>

### Necropower and Late Modern Colonial Occupation

It might be thought that the ideas developed above relate to a distant past. In the past, indeed, imperial wars did have the objective of destroying local powers, installing troops, and instituting new models of military control over civil populations. A group of local auxiliaries could assist in the management of conquered territories annexed to the empire. Within the empire, the vanquished populations were given a status that enshrined their despoilment. In these configurations, violence constituted the original form of the right, and exception provided the structure of sovereignty. Each stage of imperialism also involved certain key technologies (the gunboat, quinine, steamship lines, submarine telegraph cables, and colonial railroads).<sup>46</sup>

*Colonial occupation* itself was a matter of seizing, delimiting, and asserting control over a physical geographical area—of writing on the ground a new set of social and spatial relations. The writing of new spatial relations (territorializa-

43. For a powerful rendition of this process, see Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

44. On the “enemy,” see *L’ennemi*, special issue, *Raisons politiques*, no. 5 (2002).

45. Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*.

46. See Daniel R. Headrick, *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

tion) was, ultimately, tantamount to the production of boundaries and hierarchies, zones and enclaves; the subversion of existing property arrangements; the classification of people according to different categories; resource extraction; and, finally, the manufacturing of a large reservoir of cultural imaginaries. These imaginaries gave meaning to the enactment of differential rights to differing categories of people for different purposes within the same space; in brief, the exercise of sovereignty. Space was therefore the raw material of sovereignty and the violence it carried with it. Sovereignty meant occupation, and occupation meant relegating the colonized into a third zone between subjecthood and objecthood.

Such was the case of the apartheid regime in South Africa. Here, the *township* was the structural form and the *homelands* became the reserves (rural bases) whereby the flow of migrant labor could be regulated and African urbanization held in check.<sup>47</sup> As Belinda Bozzoli has shown, the township in particular was a place where “severe oppression and poverty were experienced on a racial and class basis.”<sup>48</sup> A sociopolitical, cultural, and economic formation, the township was a peculiar spatial institution scientifically planned for the purposes of control.<sup>49</sup> The functioning of the homelands and townships entailed severe restrictions on production for the market by blacks in white areas, the terminating of land ownership by blacks except in reserved areas, the illegalization of black residence on white farms (except as servants in the employ of whites), the control of urban influx, and later, the denial of citizenship to Africans.<sup>50</sup>

Frantz Fanon describes the spatialization of colonial occupation in vivid terms. For him, colonial occupation entails first and foremost a division of space into compartments. It involves the setting of boundaries and internal frontiers epitomized by barracks and police stations; it is regulated by the language of pure force, immediate presence, and frequent and direct action; and it is premised on the principle of reciprocal exclusivity.<sup>51</sup> But more important, it is the very way in which necropower operates: “The town belonging to the colonized people . . . is

47. On the township, see G. G. Maasdorp and A. S. B. Humphreys, eds., *From Shantytown to Township: An Economic Study of African Poverty and Rehousing in a South African City* (Cape Town: Juta, 1975).

48. Belinda Bozzoli, “Why Were the 1980s ‘Millenarian’? Style, Repertoire, Space and Authority in South Africa’s Black Cities,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 13 (2000): 79.

49. Bozzoli, “Why Were the 1980s ‘Millenarian’?”

50. See Herman Giliomee, ed., *Up against the Fences: Poverty, Passes and Privileges in South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1985); Francis Wilson, *Migrant Labour in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Christian Institute of Southern Africa, 1972).

51. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. C. Farrington (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991), 39.



a place of ill fame, peopled by men of evil repute. They are born there, it matters little where or how; they die there, it matters not where, nor how. It is a world without spaciousness; men live there on top of each other. The native town is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light. The native town is a crouching village, a town on its knees.”<sup>52</sup> In this case, sovereignty means the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is *disposable* and who is not.

Late-modern colonial occupation differs in many ways from early-modern occupation, particularly in its combining of the disciplinary, the biopolitical, and the necropolitical. The most accomplished form of necropower is the contemporary colonial occupation of Palestine.

Here, the colonial state derives its fundamental claim of sovereignty and legitimacy from the authority of its own particular narrative of history and identity. This narrative is itself underpinned by the idea that the state has a divine right to exist; the narrative competes with another for the same sacred space. Because the two narratives are incompatible and the two populations are inextricably intertwined, any demarcation of the territory on the basis of pure identity is quasi-impossible. Violence and sovereignty, in this case, claim a divine foundation: peoplehood itself is forged by the worship of one deity, and national identity is imagined as an identity against the Other, other deities.<sup>53</sup> History, geography, cartography, and archaeology are supposed to back these claims, thereby closely binding identity and topography. As a consequence, colonial violence and occupation are profoundly underwritten by the sacred terror of truth and exclusivity (mass expulsions, resettlement of “stateless” people in refugee camps, settlement of new colonies). Lying beneath the terror of the sacred is the constant excavation of missing bones; the permanent remembrance of a torn body hewn in a thousand pieces and never self-same; the limits, or better, the impossibility of representing for oneself an “original crime,” an unspeakable death: the terror of the Holocaust.<sup>54</sup>

To return to Fanon’s spatial reading of colonial occupation, the late-modern colonial occupation in Gaza and the West Bank presents three major characteristics in relation to the working of the specific terror formation I have called necropower. First is the dynamics of territorial fragmentation, the sealing off and

52. Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 37–39.

53. See Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

54. See Lydia Flem, *L’Art et la mémoire des camps: Représenter exterminer*, ed. Jean-Luc Nancy (Paris: Seuil, 2001)

expansion of settlements. The objective of this process is twofold: to render any movement impossible and to implement separation along the model of the apartheid state. The occupied territories are therefore divided into a web of intricate internal borders and various isolated cells. According to Eyal Weizman, by departing from a planar division of a territory and embracing a principle of creation of three-dimensional boundaries across sovereign bulks, this dispersal and segmentation clearly redefines the relationship between sovereignty and space.<sup>55</sup>

For Weizman, these actions constitute “the politics of verticality.” The resultant form of sovereignty might be called “vertical sovereignty.” Under a regime of vertical sovereignty, colonial occupation operates through schemes of over- and underpasses, a separation of the airspace from the ground. The ground itself is divided between its crust and the subterrain. Colonial occupation is also dictated by the very nature of the terrain and its topographical variations (hilltops and valleys, mountains and bodies of water). Thus, high ground offers strategic assets not found in the valleys (effectiveness of sight, self-protection, panoptic fortification that generates gazes to many different ends). Says Weizman: “Settlements could be seen as urban optical devices for surveillance and the exercise of power.” Under conditions of late-modern colonial occupation, surveillance is both inward- and outward-oriented, the eye acting as weapon and vice versa. Instead of the conclusive division between two nations across a boundary line, “the organization of the West Bank’s particular terrain has created multiple separations, provisional boundaries, which relate to each other through surveillance and control,” according to Weizman. Under these circumstances, colonial occupation is not only akin to control, surveillance, and separation, it is also tantamount to seclusion. It is a *splintering occupation*, along the lines of the splintering urbanism characteristic of late modernity (suburban enclaves or gated communities).<sup>56</sup>

From an infrastructural point of view, a splintering form of colonial occupation is characterized by a network of fast bypass roads, bridges, and tunnels that weave over and under one another in an attempt at maintaining the Fanonian “principle of reciprocal exclusivity.” According to Weizman, “the bypass roads attempt to separate Israeli traffic networks from Palestinian ones, preferably without allowing them ever to cross. They therefore emphasize the overlapping of two separate geographies that inhabit the same landscape. At points where the networks do cross, a makeshift separation is created. Most often, small dust roads

55. See Eyal Weizman, “The Politics of Verticality,” *openDemocracy* (Web publication at [www.openDemocracy.net](http://www.openDemocracy.net)), 25 April 2002.

56. See Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin, *Splintering Urbanism: Networked Infrastructures, Technological Mobility and the Urban Condition* (London: Routledge, 2001).

are dug out to allow Palestinians to cross under the fast, wide highways on which Israeli vans and military vehicles rush between settlements.”<sup>57</sup>

Under conditions of vertical sovereignty and splintering colonial occupation, communities are separated across a y-axis. This leads to a proliferation of the sites of violence. The battlegrounds are not located solely at the surface of the earth. The underground as well as the airspace are transformed into conflict zones. There is no continuity between the ground and the sky. Even the boundaries in airspace are divided between lower and upper layers. Everywhere, the symbolics of the *top* (who is on top) is reiterated. Occupation of the skies therefore acquires a critical importance, since most of the policing is done from the air. Various other technologies are mobilized to this effect: sensors aboard unmanned air vehicles (UAVs), aerial reconnaissance jets, early warning Hawkeye planes, assault helicopters, an Earth-observation satellite, techniques of “hologrammatization.” Killing becomes precisely targeted.

Such precision is combined with the tactics of medieval siege warfare adapted to the networked sprawl of urban refugee camps. An orchestrated and systematic sabotage of the enemy’s societal and urban infrastructure network complements the appropriation of land, water, and airspace resources. Critical to these techniques of disabling the enemy is *bulldozing*: demolishing houses and cities; uprooting olive trees; riddling water tanks with bullets; bombing and jamming electronic communications; digging up roads; destroying electricity transformers; tearing up airport runways; disabling television and radio transmitters; smashing computers; ransacking cultural and politico-bureaucratic symbols of the proto-Palestinian state; looting medical equipment. In other words, *infrastructural warfare*.<sup>58</sup> While the Apache helicopter gunship is used to police the air and to kill from overhead, the armored bulldozer (the Caterpillar D-9) is used on the ground as a weapon of war and intimidation. In contrast to early-modern colonial occupation, these two weapons establish the superiority of high-tech tools of late-modern terror.<sup>59</sup>

As the Palestinian case illustrates, late-modern colonial occupation is a concatenation of multiple powers: disciplinary, biopolitical, and necropolitical. The

57. Weizman, “Politics of Verticality.”

58. See Stephen Graham, “‘Clean Territory’: Urbicide in the West Bank,” *openDemocracy* (Web publication at [www.openDemocracy.net](http://www.openDemocracy.net)), 7 August 2002.

59. Compare with the panoply of new bombs the United States deployed during the Gulf War and the war in Kosovo, most aimed at raining down graphite crystals to disable comprehensively electrical power and distribution stations. Michael Ignatieff, *Virtual War* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000).

combination of the three allocates to the colonial power an absolute domination over the inhabitants of the occupied territory. The *state of siege* is itself a military institution. It allows a modality of killing that does not distinguish between the external and the internal enemy. Entire populations are the target of the sovereign. The besieged villages and towns are sealed off and cut off from the world. Daily life is militarized. Freedom is given to local military commanders to use their discretion as to when and whom to shoot. Movement between the territorial cells requires formal permits. Local civil institutions are systematically destroyed. The besieged population is deprived of their means of income. Invisible killing is added to outright executions.

### War Machines and Heteronomy

After having examined the workings of necropower under the conditions of late-modern colonial occupation, I would like to turn now to contemporary wars. Contemporary wars belong to a new moment and can hardly be understood through earlier theories of “contractual violence” or typologies of “just” and “unjust” wars or even Carl von Clausewitz’s instrumentalism.<sup>60</sup> According to Zygmunt Bauman, wars of the globalization era do not include the conquest, acquisition, and takeover of a territory among their objectives. Ideally, they are hit-and-run affairs.

The growing gap between high-tech and low-tech means of war has never been as evident as in the Gulf War and the Kosovo campaign. In both cases, the doctrine of “overwhelming or decisive force” was implemented to its full effect thanks to a military-technological revolution that has multiplied the capacity for destruction in unprecedented ways.<sup>61</sup> Air war as it relates to altitude, ordnance, visibility, and intelligence is here a case in point. During the Gulf War, the combined use of smart bombs and bombs coated with depleted uranium (DU), high-tech stand-off weapons, electronic sensors, laser-guided missiles, cluster and asphyxiation bombs, stealth capabilities, unmanned aerial vehicles, and cyber-intelligence quickly crippled the enemy’s capabilities.

In Kosovo, the “degrading” of Serbian capabilities took the form of an infrastructural war that targeted and destroyed bridges, railroads, highways, commu-

60. See Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

61. Benjamin Ederington and Michael J. Mazarr, eds., *Turning Point: The Gulf War and U.S. Military Strategy* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1994).

nications networks, oil storage depots, heating plants, power stations, and water treatment facilities. As can be surmised, the execution of such a military strategy, especially when combined with the imposition of sanctions, results in shutting down the enemy's life-support system. The enduring damage to civilian life is particularly telling. For example, the destruction of the Pancevo petrochemical complex in the outskirts of Belgrade during the Kosovo campaign "left the vicinity so toxic with vinyl chloride, ammonia, mercury, naphtha and dioxin that pregnant women were directed to seek abortions, and all local women were advised to avoid pregnancy for two years."<sup>62</sup>

Wars of the globalization era therefore aim to force the enemy into submission regardless of the immediate consequences, side effects, and "collateral damage" of the military actions. In this sense, contemporary wars are more reminiscent of the warfare strategy of the nomads than of the sedentary nations or the "conquer-and-annex" territorial wars of modernity. In Bauman's words: "They rest their superiority over the settled population on the speed of their own movement; their own ability to descend from nowhere without notice and vanish again without warning, their ability to travel light and not to bother with the kind of belongings which confine the mobility and the maneuvering potential of the sedentary people."<sup>63</sup>

This new moment is one of global mobility. An important feature of the age of global mobility is that military operations and the exercise of the right to kill are no longer the sole monopoly of states, and the "regular army" is no longer the unique modality of carrying out these functions. The claim to ultimate or final authority in a particular political space is not easily made. Instead, a patchwork of overlapping and incomplete rights to rule emerges, inextricably superimposed and tangled, in which different de facto juridical instances are geographically interwoven and plural allegiances, asymmetrical suzerainties, and enclaves abound.<sup>64</sup> In

62. Thomas W. Smith, "The New Law of War: Legitimizing Hi-Tech and Infrastructural Violence," *International Studies Quarterly* 46 (2002): 367. On Iraq, see G. L. Simons, *The Scourging of Iraq: Sanctions, Law and Natural Justice*, 2d ed. (New York: St. Martin's, 1998); see also A. Shehabaldin and W. M. Laughlin Jr., "Economic Sanctions against Iraq: Human and Economic Costs," *International Journal of Human Rights* 3, no. 4 (2000): 1–18.

63. Zygmunt Bauman, "Wars of the Globalization Era," *European Journal of Social Theory* 4, no. 1 (2001): 15. "Remote as they are from their 'targets,' scurrying over those they hit too fast to witness the devastation they cause and the blood they spill, the pilots-turned-computer-operators hardly ever have a chance of looking their victims in the face and to survey the human misery they have sowed," adds Bauman. "Military professionals of our time see no corpses and no wounds. They may sleep well; no pangs of conscience will keep them awake" (27). See also "Penser la guerre aujourd'hui," *Cahiers de la Villa Gillet* no. 16 (2002): 75–152.

64. Achille Mbembe, "At the Edge of the World: Boundaries, Territoriality, and Sovereignty in Africa," *Public Culture* 12 (2000): 259–84.

this heteronomous organization of territorial rights and claims, it makes little sense to insist on distinctions between “internal” and “external” political realms, separated by clearly demarcated boundaries.

Let’s take Africa as an example. Here, the political economy of statehood dramatically changed over the last quarter of the twentieth century. Many African states can no longer claim a monopoly on violence and on the means of coercion within their territory. Nor can they claim a monopoly on territorial boundaries. Coercion itself has become a market commodity. Military manpower is bought and sold on a market in which the identity of suppliers and purchasers means almost nothing. Urban militias, private armies, armies of regional lords, private security firms, and state armies all claim the right to exercise violence or to kill. Neighboring states or rebel movements lease armies to poor states. Nonstate deployers of violence supply two critical coercive resources: labor and minerals. Increasingly, the vast majority of armies are composed of citizen soldiers, child soldiers, mercenaries, and privateers.<sup>65</sup>

Alongside armies have therefore emerged what, following Deleuze and Guattari, we could refer to as *war machines*.<sup>66</sup> War machines are made up of segments of armed men that split up or merge with one another depending on the tasks to be carried out and the circumstances. Polymorphous and diffuse organizations, war machines are characterized by their capacity for metamorphosis. Their relation to space is mobile. Sometimes, they enjoy complex links with state forms (from autonomy to incorporation). The state may, of its own doing, transform itself into a war machine. It may moreover appropriate to itself an existing war machine or help to create one. War machines function by borrowing from regular armies while incorporating new elements well adapted to the principle of segmentation and deterritorialization. Regular armies, in turn, may readily appropriate some of the characteristics of war machines.

A war machine combines a plurality of functions. It has the features of a political organization and a mercantile company. It operates through capture and depredations and can even coin its own money. In order to fuel the extraction and

65. In international law, “privateers” are defined as “vessels belonging to private owners, and sailing under a commission of war empowering the person to whom it is granted to carry on all forms of hostility which are permissible at sea by the usages of war.” I use the term here to mean armed formations acting independently of any politically organized society, in the pursuit of private interests, whether under the mask of the state or not. See Janice Thomson, *Mercenaries, Pirates, and Sovereigns* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997).

66. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Capitalisme et schizophrénie* (Paris: Editions de minuit, 1980), 434–527.

export of natural resources located in the territory they control, war machines forge direct connections with transnational networks. War machines emerged in Africa during the last quarter of the twentieth century in direct relation to the erosion of the postcolonial state's capacity to build the economic underpinnings of political authority and order. This capacity involves raising revenue and commanding and regulating access to natural resources within a well-defined territory. In the mid-1970s, as the state's ability to maintain this capacity began to erode, there emerged a clear-cut link between monetary instability and spatial fragmentation. In the 1980s, the brutal experience of money suddenly losing its value became more commonplace, with various countries undergoing cycles of hyperinflation (which included such stunts as the sudden replacement of a currency). During the last decades of the twentieth century, monetary circulation has influenced state and society in at least two different ways.

First, we have seen a general drying-up of liquidities and their gradual concentration along certain channels, access to which has been subject to increasingly draconian conditions. As a result, the number of individuals endowed with the material means to control dependents through the creation of debts has abruptly decreased. Historically, capturing and fixing dependents through the mechanism of debt has always been a central aspect of both the production of people and the constitution of the political bond.<sup>67</sup> Such bonds were crucial in determining the value of persons and gauging their value and utility. When their value and utility were not proven, they could be disposed of as slaves, pawns, or clients.

Second, the controlled inflow and the fixing of movements of money around zones in which specific resources are extracted has made possible the formation of *enclave economies* and has shifted the old calculus between people and things. The concentration of activities connected with the extraction of valuable resources around these enclaves has, in return, turned the enclaves into privileged spaces of war and death. War itself is fed by increased sales of the products extracted.<sup>68</sup> New linkages have therefore emerged between war making, war machines, and resource extraction.<sup>69</sup> War machines are implicated in the constitution of highly

67. Joseph C. Miller, *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730–1830* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), especially chaps. 2 and 4.

68. See Jakkie Cilliers and Christian Dietrich, eds., *Angola's War Economy: The Role of Oil and Diamonds* (Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, 2000).

69. See, for example, "Rapport du Groupe d'experts sur l'exploitation illégale des ressources naturelles et autres richesses de la République démocratique du Congo," United Nations Report No. 2/2001/357, submitted by the Secretary-General to the Security Council, 12 April 2001. See also

transnational local or regional economies. In most places, the collapse of formal political institutions under the strain of violence tends to lead to the formation of militia economies. War machines (in this case militias or rebel movements) rapidly become highly organized mechanisms of predation, taxing the territories and the population they occupy and drawing on a range of transnational networks and diasporas that provide both material and financial support.

Correlated to the new geography of resource extraction is the emergence of an unprecedented form of governmentality that consists in the *management of the multitudes*. The extraction and looting of natural resources by war machines goes hand in hand with brutal attempts to immobilize and spatially fix whole categories of people or, paradoxically, to unleash them, to force them to scatter over broad areas no longer contained by the boundaries of a territorial state. As a political category, populations are then disaggregated into rebels, child soldiers, victims or refugees, or civilians incapacitated by mutilation or simply massacred on the model of ancient sacrifices, while the “survivors,” after a horrific exodus, are confined in camps and zones of exception.<sup>70</sup>

This form of governmentality is different from the colonial *commandement*.<sup>71</sup> The techniques of policing and discipline and the choice between obedience and simulation that characterized the colonial and postcolonial potentate are gradually being replaced by an alternative that is more tragic because more extreme. Technologies of destruction have become more tactile, more anatomical and sensorial, in a context in which the choice is between life and death.<sup>72</sup> If power still depends on tight control over bodies (or on concentrating them in camps), the new 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.” In turn, the generalization of insecurity has deepened the societal distinction between those who bear weapons and those who do not (*loi de repartition des armes*). Inceas-

---

Richard Snyder, “Does Lootable Wealth Breed Disorder? States, Regimes, and the Political Economy of Extraction” (paper).

70. See Loren B. Landau, “The Humanitarian Hangover: Transnationalization of Governmental Practice in Tanzania’s Refugee-Populated Areas,” *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (2002): 260–99, especially 281–87.

71. On the *commandement*, see Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), chaps. 1–3.

72. See Leisel Talley, Paul B. Spiegel, and Mona Girgis, “An Investigation of Increasing Mortality among Congolese Refugees in Lugufu Camp, Tanzania, May–June 1999,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 14, no. 4 (2001): 412–27.



ingly, war is no longer waged between armies of two sovereign states. It is waged by armed groups acting behind the mask of the state against armed groups that have no state but control very distinct territories; both sides having as their main targets civilian populations that are unarmed or organized into militias. In cases where armed dissidents have not completely taken over state power, they have provoked territorial partitions and succeeded in controlling entire regions that they administer on the model of fiefdoms, especially where there are mineral deposits.<sup>73</sup>

The ways of killing do not themselves vary much. In the case of massacres in particular, lifeless bodies are quickly reduced to the status of simple skeletons. Their morphology henceforth inscribes them in the register of undifferentiated generality: simple relics of an unburied pain, empty, meaningless corporealities, strange deposits plunged into cruel stupor. In the case of the Rwandan genocide—in which a number of skeletons were at least preserved in a visible state, if not exhumed—what is striking is the tension between the petrification of the bones and their strange coolness on one hand, and on the other, their stubborn will to mean, to signify something.

In these impassive bits of bone, there seems to be no *ataraxia*: nothing but the illusory rejection of a death that has already occurred. In other cases, in which physical amputation replaces immediate death, cutting off limbs opens the way to the deployment of techniques of incision, ablation, and excision that also have bones as their target. The traces of this demiurgic surgery persist for a long time, in the form of human shapes that are alive, to be sure, but whose bodily integrity has been replaced by pieces, fragments, folds, even immense wounds that are difficult to close. Their function is to keep before the eyes of the victim—and of the people around him or her—the morbid spectacle of severing.

## Of Motion and Metal

Let us return to the example of Palestine where two apparently irreconcilable logics are confronting each other: the *logic of martyrdom* and the *logic of survival*. In examining these two logics, I would like to reflect on the twin issues of death and terror on the one hand and terror and freedom on the other.

In the confrontation between these two logics, terror is not on one side and

73. See Tony Hodges, *Angola: From Afro-Stalinism to Petro-Diamond Capitalism* (Oxford: James Currey, 2001), chap. 7; Stephen Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy: The Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimension of an African Civil War* (London: Hurst & Company, 1999).

death on the other. Terror and death are at the heart of each. As Elias Canetti reminds us, the survivor is the one who, having stood in the path of death, knowing of many deaths and standing in the midst of the fallen, is still alive. Or, more precisely, the survivor is the one who has taken on a whole pack of enemies and managed not only to escape alive, but to kill his or her attackers. This is why, to a large extent, the lowest form of survival is killing. Canetti points out that in the logic of survival, “each man is the enemy of every other.” Even more radically, in the logic of survival one’s horror at the sight of death turns into satisfaction that it is someone else who is dead. It is the death of the other, his or her physical presence as a corpse, that makes the survivor feel unique. And each enemy killed makes the survivor feel more secure.<sup>74</sup>

The logic of martyrdom proceeds along different lines. It is epitomized by the figure of the “suicide bomber,” which itself raises a number of questions. What intrinsic difference is there between killing with a missile helicopter or a tank and killing with one’s own body? Does the distinction between the arms used to inflict death prevent the establishment of a system of general exchange between the manner of killing and the manner of dying?

The “suicide bomber” wears no ordinary soldier’s uniform and displays no weapon. The candidate for martyrdom chases his or her targets; the enemy is a prey for whom a trap is set. Significant in this respect is the location of the ambush laid: the bus stop, the café, the discotheque, the marketplace, the checkpoint, the road—in sum, the spaces of everyday life.

The trapping of the body is added to the ambush location. The candidate for martyrdom transforms his or her body into a mask that hides the soon-to-be-detonated weapon. Unlike the tank or the missile that is clearly visible, the weapon carried in the shape of the body is invisible. Thus concealed, it forms part of the body. It is so intimately part of the body that at the time of detonation it annihilates the body of its bearer, who carries with it the bodies of others when it does not reduce them to pieces. The body does not simply conceal a weapon. The body is transformed into a weapon, not in a metaphorical sense but in the truly ballistic sense.

In this instance, my death goes hand in hand with the death of the Other. Homicide and suicide are accomplished in the same act. And to a large extent, resistance and self-destruction are synonymous. To deal out death is therefore to reduce the other and oneself to the status of pieces of inert flesh, scattered every-

74. See Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. C. Stewart (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1984), 227–80.

where, and assembled with difficulty before the burial. In this case, war is the war of body on body (*guerre au corps-à-corps*). To kill, one has to come as close as possible to the body of the enemy. To detonate the bomb necessitates resolving the question of distance, through the work of proximity and concealment.

How are we to interpret this manner of spilling blood in which death is not simply that which is *my own*, but always goes hand in hand with the death of the other?<sup>75</sup> How does it differ from death inflicted by a tank or a missile, in a context in which the cost of my survival is calculated in terms of my capacity and readiness to kill someone else? In the logic of “martyrdom,” the will to die is fused with the willingness to take the enemy with you, that is, with closing the door on the possibility of life for everyone. This logic seems contrary to another one, which consists in wishing to impose death on others while preserving one’s own life. Canetti describes this moment of survival as a moment of power. In such a case, triumph develops precisely from the possibility of being there when the others (in this case the enemy) are no longer there. Such is the logic of heroism as classically understood: to execute others while holding one’s own death at a distance.

In the logic of martyrdom, a new semiosis of killing emerges. It is not necessarily based on a relationship between form and matter. As I have already indicated, the body here becomes the very uniform of the martyr. But the body as such is not only an object to protect against danger and death. The body in itself has neither power nor value. The power and value of the body result from a process of abstraction based on the desire for eternity. In that sense, the martyr, having established a moment of supremacy in which the subject overcomes his own mortality, can be seen as laboring under the sign of the future. In other words, in death the future is collapsed into the present.

In its desire for eternity, the besieged body passes through two stages. First, it is transformed into a mere thing, malleable matter. Second, the manner in which it is put to death—suicide—affords it its ultimate signification. The matter of the body, or again the matter which is the body, is invested with properties that cannot be deduced from its character as a thing, but from a transcendental *nomos* outside it. The besieged body becomes a piece of metal whose function is, through sacrifice, to bring eternal life into being. The body duplicates itself and, in death, literally and metaphorically escapes the state of siege and occupation.

Let me explore, in conclusion, the relation between terror, freedom, and sacrifice. Martin Heidegger argues that the human’s “being toward death” is the deci-

75. Martin Heidegger, *Etre et temps* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), 289–322.

sive condition of all true human freedom.<sup>76</sup> In other words, one is free to live one's own life only because one is free to die one's own death. Whereas Heidegger grants an existential status to being-toward-death and considers it an event of freedom, Bataille suggests that "sacrifice in reality reveals nothing." It is not simply the absolute manifestation of negativity. It is also a comedy. For Bataille, death reveals the human subject's animal side, which he refers to moreover as the subject's "natural being." "For man to reveal himself in the end, he has to die, but he will have to do so while alive—by looking at himself ceasing to exist," he adds. In other words, the human subject has to be fully alive at the very moment of dying, to be aware of his or her death, to live with the impression of actually dying. Death itself must become awareness of the self at the very time that it does away with the conscious being. "In a sense, this is what happens (what at least is on the point of taking place, or what takes place in an elusive, fugitive manner), by means of a subterfuge in the sacrifice. In the sacrifice, the sacrificed identifies himself with the animal on the point of death. Thus he dies seeing himself die, and even, in some sense, through his own will, at one with the weapon of sacrifice. But this is play!" And for Bataille, play is more or less the means by which the human subject "voluntarily tricks himself."<sup>77</sup>

How does the notion of play and trickery relate to the "suicide bomber"? There is no doubt that in the case of the suicide bomber the sacrifice consists of the spectacular putting to death of the self, of becoming his or her own victim (self-sacrifice). The self-sacrificed proceeds to take power over his or her death and to approach it head-on. This power may be derived from the belief that the destruction of one's own body does not affect the continuity of the being. The idea is that the being exists outside us. The self-sacrifice consists, here, in the removal of a twofold prohibition: that of self-immolation (suicide) and that of murder. Unlike primitive sacrifices, however, there is no animal to serve as a substitute victim. Death here achieves the character of a transgression. But unlike crucifixion, it has no expiatory dimension. It is not related to the Hegelian paradigms of prestige or recognition. Indeed, a dead person cannot recognize his or her killer, who is also dead. Does this imply that death occurs here as pure annihilation and nothingness, excess and scandal?

Whether read from the perspective of slavery or of colonial occupation, death and freedom are irrevocably interwoven. As we have seen, terror is a defining feature of both slave and late-modern colonial regimes. Both regimes are also

76. Heidegger, *Etre et temps*.

77. Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes*, 336.

specific instances and experiences of unfreedom. To live under late modern occupation is to experience a permanent condition of “being in pain”: fortified structures, military posts, and roadblocks everywhere; buildings that bring back painful memories of humiliation, interrogations, and beatings; curfews that imprison hundreds of thousands in their cramped homes every night from dusk to daybreak; soldiers patrolling the unlit streets, frightened by their own shadows; children blinded by rubber bullets; parents shamed and beaten in front of their families; soldiers urinating on fences, shooting at the rooftop water tanks just for fun, chanting loud offensive slogans, pounding on fragile tin doors to frighten the children, confiscating papers, or dumping garbage in the middle of a residential neighborhood; border guards kicking over a vegetable stand or closing borders at whim; bones broken; shootings and fatalities—a certain kind of madness.<sup>78</sup>

In such circumstances, the discipline of life and the necessities of hardship (trial by death) are marked by excess. What connects terror, death, and freedom is an *ecstatic* notion of temporality and politics. The future, here, can be authentically anticipated, but not in the present. The present itself is but a moment of vision—vision of the freedom not yet come. Death in the present is the mediator of redemption. Far from being an encounter with a limit, boundary, or barrier, it is experienced as “a release from terror and bondage.”<sup>79</sup> As Gilroy notes, this preference for death over continued servitude is a commentary on the nature of freedom itself (or the lack thereof). If this lack is the very nature of what it means for the slave or the colonized to exist, the same lack is also precisely the way in which he or she takes account of his or her mortality. Referring to the practice of individual or mass suicide by slaves cornered by the slave catchers, Gilroy suggests that death, in this case, can be represented as agency. For death is precisely that from and over which I have power. But it is also that space where freedom and negation operate.

## Conclusion

In this essay I have argued that contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death (necropolitics) profoundly reconfigure the relations among resistance, sacrifice, and terror. I have demonstrated that the notion of biopower is insufficient to account for contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power

78. For what precedes, see Amira Hass, *Drinking the Sea at Gaza: Days and Nights in a Land under Siege* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996).

79. Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 63.

of death. Moreover I have put forward the notion of necropolitics and necropower to account for the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of *death-worlds*, 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*. The essay has also outlined some of the repressed topographies of cruelty (the plantation and the colony in particular) and has suggested that under conditions of necropower, the lines between resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom are blurred.

**Achille Mbembe** is a senior researcher at the Institute of Social and Economic Research at the University of the Witwatersrand. Recent publications include *On the Postcolony* (2001) and “African Modes of Self-Writing,” *Public Culture* (winter 2002).