

POSTCOLONIAL THOUGHT EXPLAINED TO THE FRENCH

An Interview with Achille Mbembe
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*Talking to French magazine **Esprit** in December 2006, Achille Mbembe suggests that postcolonial thought looks original because it developed in a transnational, eclectic vein from the very start. This enabled it to combine the anti-imperialist tradition with a specific take on worldliness and a poetics of human mutuality. The interview was conducted by Olivier Mongin, Nathalie Lempereur and Jean-Louis Schlegel.*

Esprit: Can you tell us what “postcolonial theory” is all about and what lies behind it? How, in particular, does it differ from anti-western and Third World currents of thought?

Achille Mbembe: What is known in the English speaking world as “postcolonial studies” and “postcolonial theory” is characterized by its heterogeneity and what constitutes its originality cannot be summed up easily in a few words.

Perhaps I’d better start by making clear that it has little to do with what we know in France as “Third

Worldism” (*Tiers-mondisme*). In truth, it is a mode of thinking that derives from a number of sources and that is far from constituting a system because it is in large part being constructed as it moves forward. That’s why it would in my opinion be an exaggeration to call it a “theory”. It derives both from anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles on the one hand, and from the heritage of Western philosophy and of the disciplines that constitute the European humanities on the other. It first emerged in the field of literary criticism before it migrated to various disciplines in the social sciences. It is both a protean and a fragmented mode of thought – which is both a strength and a weakness. In spite of its protean and fragmented nature – or maybe thanks to both – it has made a significant contribution to ways of reading our modernity.

Postcolonial thought is known for its critique, not of the West per se, but of the effects of brutality and blindness produced by a certain conception – I’d call it colonial – of reason, of humanism, and of universalism. This critique is different from that once made by the existentialist, phenomenological and post-structuralist movements in post-war France. It is chiefly concerned with the issue of subjecthood and self-creation, autonomy and entanglement, sameness and difference. But its approach has not much to do with the Nietzschean “death of God” or the Sartrean idea of “man without God” taking the place vacated by the “dead God”. It hardly subscribes either to Foucault’s notion that “God being dead, man is dead too”.

On the contrary, it puts its finger on two things. First, it exposes both the violence inherent in a particular concept of reason, and the gulf separating European moral philosophy from its practical, po-

litical and symbolic outcomes in the colony. How indeed can the much-trumpeted faith in “man” be reconciled with the way in which colonized people’s life, labor and world of signifiers got sacrificed? That is the question Aimé Césaire poses in his *Discourse on Colonialism*, for example.

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Secondly, postcolonial thought deconstructs colonial prose – that is to say the mental infrastructures, the symbolic forms and representations underpinning the imperial project. It also unmasks the power of this prose for falsification – in a word, the stock of falsehoods and the weight of fantasizing functions without which colonialism as a historical power system could not have worked. In this way it reveals how what passed for European humanism manifested itself in the colonies as duplicity, double-talk and a travesty of reality. Indeed, colonial regimes never ceased telling lies about themselves and others. As Frantz Fanon explains so clearly in *Black Skin, White Masks*, racialization was the driving force behind this economy of duplicity and falsehood. Race was the Beast at the heart of European colonial humanism. Postcolonial thought seeks to document what it was to live or to survive under the sign of the Beast. It shows that there is in European colonial humanism something that has to be called unconscious self-hatred. Indeed racism in general, and colonial racism in particular, represents the transference of this self-hatred to the Other.

There is another level in the postcolonial critique of European humanism and universalism that, if the term had not given rise to so many misunderstand-

ings, could be called “biopolitical”. The totem that colonized peoples discovered behind the mask of European humanism and universalism was not only deaf and blind most of the time. It was also, above all, characterized by the desire for self-destruction. But insofar as this form of death was necessarily conveyed through that of others, it was a “delegated death”. Once again, it is Fanon who has analyzed, better than anyone else, this kind of necropolitical side of life itself, or else which, in an act of reversion, takes “giving death” for “giving life”. That is why the colonial relationship fluctuated constantly between the desire to extract resources and exploit the natives, and the temptation to exterminate them.

What finally characterizes postcolonial thought is entanglement and concatenation and its critique of essentialism. From this point of view it is opposed to a particular version of Western illusion, that there can be no subject other than in the circular, permanent referral to oneself and one’s own mastery, to an essential and inexhaustible singularity. In countering this illusion, postcolonial thought stresses the fact that identity arises from multiplicity and dispersion, that self-referral is only possible in the in-between, in the gap between mark and demarcation, in co-constitution. Seen from this perspective, colonization no longer appears as mechanical and unilateral domination forcing the subjugated into silence and inaction. Quite the reverse: the colonized person is a living, talking, conscious, active individual whose identity arises from violation, erasure and self-rewriting.

Moreover, the universalization of imperialism cannot be explained by the violence of coercion alone. It was a consequence too of the fact that many colonized people were complicit in a fable that they

found attractive in a number of respects. The identity of the colonized was shaped by the intersection between ellipsis, engagement and ambivalence.

This is perhaps the moment to point out that postcolonial thought, the critique of European humanism and imperial forms of universalism, is not an end in itself. It is carried out with the aim of paving the way for an enquiry into the possibility of a politics of the future, of mutuality and of the common. The prerequisite for such a politics is the recognition of the Other as a fellow human. I believe that this enrolment in the future, in the interminable quest for new horizons for the human through the recognition of the Other as fundamentally human, is an aspect of postcolonial thought that is all too often forgotten. It is a constituent part of Fanon’s quest, of Senghor’s in the Poetical Works written during his imprisonment in the German camp Front Stalag 230, of Edward Said’s meditations at the end of his life or, more recently, of Edouard Glissant or Paul Gilroy’s considerations about the possibility of convivial life in a henceforth multi-culture world. (See Gilroy’s book *Postcolonial Melancholia*).

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One last point. What constitutes the political strength of postcolonial thought is its enrolment in the historic social struggles of colonized societies and especially its re-reading of the theoretical praxis of what we call liberation movements. If postcolonial thought today is the preserve of British and American academia and of English-speaking scholars, it

should not be forgotten that this current was largely inspired by French and Afro-French thinking. I have mentioned Fanon, Césaire and Senghor. I could have added Glissant and others too. Added to this is the influence of French thinkers like Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Foucault, Derrida and even Lacan. It is therefore a mode of thinking that in several respects is very close to a peculiarly French approach to reasoning. So it is rather paradoxical that, because of its cultural insularity and the narcissism of its elites, France has cut itself off from these new ventures in world thought.

Esprit: *Can a link be established between globalization and postcolonial thought?*

Achille Mbembe: It can be said that postcolonial thought is in many respects a critique of worldliness even if initially its practitioners do not use that term. In the first place, it shows how entangled are the histories of colonies and those of the metropolises. The Napoléon of the restoration of slavery and the Toussaint Louverture who represented the revolution of human rights are the dual faces of the same imperial history. Colonialism itself was a global experience that contributed to the universalization of representations, techniques and institutions. Far from being a one-way street, this process of universalization was basically a paradox, fraught with all sorts of ambiguities.

Take the Atlantic. The age of the Atlantic slave trade is also the age of the great forced migrations. It is the age of the forced intermixture of populations, of the creative fission in the course of which there arose the “créole” world of the great contemporary urban cultures. It was also the age of the great plan-

etary experiments; the moment when people, torn from their land, blood and soil, learned to imagine communities that transcended the bonds of immediate kinship, forsook the comfort of repetition and invented new forms of transnational solidarities. Before colonies became the great laboratories of modernity in the nineteenth century, the “plantation” prefigured already a new consciousness of the world and of globalization.

This is one of the reasons why the dialogue between Afro-American, Afro-Caribbean thought and postcolonial thought has been fruitful. Afro-modern thought is about interconnections. It maintains that an appeal to the world that can only be truly made where, by force of circumstances, one has been alongside others, with others. Under these conditions, “returning to oneself” is above all leaving the night of identity and the lacunae of my little world. So here we have a way of imagining worldliness that rests on the radical affirmation of the density of proximity, of displacement, even of dislocation. In other words, consciousness of the world arises from the actualization of what was already possible in me, achieved through my encounter with the lives of others, my responsibility towards the lives of others and towards seemingly distant worlds and, above all, towards people with whom I have apparently no connections: the intruders.

Esprit: *Is the postcolonial era both the hope of an exit from an inhuman world – with consequences in terms of religion – and a time of necessary reinvention?*

Achille Mbembe: To my mind it is the time both of the end and of reinvention, starting with the reinvention of what has suffered the most damage – in

the case of Afro-modern history, the “commodity-body”.

As is clearly shown by the example of South Africa on its emergence from apartheid, nothing can be reinvented unless one is capable both of glancing backward and of looking forward.

Glancing backward requires to revisit what it meant to be a witness to expropriation, dispossession and destruction. It requires that we keep documenting the apartheid archive: the gaping scars, demolished homes, broken lives; the skeletons, the debris and the rubble; the ruins and the fading memories of that there once was. It forces us to bear witness to pain and radical loss; to the myriad ways in which under racial domination, destruction was aimed at life itself and the senses, including the capacity to remember. But it also demands that we pay attention to black people’s capacity for self-making, self-reference and self-expression and to alternative versions of whiteness that are not primarily constituted around property and privilege, but around an ethics of mutuality and human solidarity.

Looking forward – the politics of possibility, a future-oriented politics – implies a meditation about how to illuminate anew the experience of being human, of human life. It means taking seriously the obligation to answer for one’s right to be; to speak in the first person; to reveal one’s name and one’s face as a condition of emergence in the world of life; to resurrect the possibility of a shared human life: the politics of mutuality.

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forces us to establish a distinction between vulnerability and victimhood, suffering and self-creation. This is how we will confront the violence that comes to us from the Other. This is also how we will make of the irruption of the Other’s face in the phenomenal order of appearance a profoundly human event, the starting point of an ethics of human proximity and mutuality.

From this perspective, South Africa is a fertile ground for critical thought. If what began in blood ends in blood the chances of a new beginning are lessened by the haunting presence of the horrors of the past. Put another way, it is difficult to reinvent anything if one simply repeats against others the violence once inflicted on oneself. There is no “good” violence that can follow on automatically from “bad” violence and be legitimized by it. All violence, “good” or “bad”, always sanctions a disjunction. The reinvention of politics in postcolonial conditions first requires people to depart from the logic of vengeance, above all when vengeance wears the shabby garb of the law or of victimhood.

That said, the struggle to escape from an inhuman order of things cannot do without what may be called the poetic productivity of the sacred. The sacred is to be understood not only in relation to the divine, but also as the therapeutic power of hope in a context in which violence has touched not only the body as such but psychic life and infrastructures too, through the denigration of the Other, through the assertion of the latter’s worthlessness.

It is this discourse – sometimes interiorized – about worthlessness that is challenged by certain forms of the sacred, the ultimate aim being to enable those who were on their knees to arise and walk at last. In these circumstances, the philosophical, po-

litical and ethical question is how to give support to this “ascent in humanity” (*la montée en humanité*): an ascent at the end of which personhood and subjecthood are restored, when person-to-person dialogue becomes possible and replaces commands delivered to the object.

Esprit: *When you speak of this ability to be oneself, to say “I”, to “arise and walk”, are you thinking in terms of individuals, or of peoples and collective entities?*

Achille Mbembe: I am referring to the task of learning again to envisage oneself as a universal source of meaning. Harm has been done to individuals quite as much as to “communities”. Liberation struggles always bring centre stage individuals who emerge from a “community” and who become experts at scrutinizing the Night, keeping a weather-eye open and shouldering on the community’s behalf the question “When?”. They are individuals who probe the Night for a glimpse of the dawn. This was what Martin Luther King did, and Nelson Mandela, and Mahatma Gandhi – heroes for whom revolutionary asceticism began with the drive for self-transformation.

The South African experiment shows clearly that the injunction to “arise and walk” is addressed to all, to the oppressed of yesteryear and to their former enemies. It is pseudo-liberationist to believe that it is enough to kill the colonist, take over his property and sleep with his wife for relationships of equality and reciprocity to be restored. South Africa enables us to see what it is in the politics of retribution and revenge that merely reproduces the Cain complex – an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. That said, the project of reconciliation cannot become a substi-

tute for the radical demand for justice. In order to enable those who were on their knees not long before, bowed down under the weight of oppression, to arise and walk, justice must be done. So there is no escape from the imperative of justice, responsibility and accountability.

Esprit: *What do you think of the experience of the “Truth and Reconciliation Commission” in South Africa?*

Achille Mbembe: It was a path that had to be followed. The TRC was a monumental narrative event. I am not saying that everything has been resolved. But symbolically, blacks and whites had to be wrenched if only metaphorically from the jaws of the dog-mentality, the pig-mentality and the rabble-mentality that is so characteristic of racism in general. To my mind, the cornerstone of the TRC was the notion of deliverance from self-hatred and from hatred of the Other.

The South African experiment teaches us that we cannot make a fetish of the fact of having been a victim in history. Doing so often makes the person who has been prey to such a calculated misfortune wish to shed blood, any blood; unfortunately, all too frequently, never the blood of the torturers but almost always someone else’s, no matter whose. Because in order to function, the fetish requires endless sacrifices and thus fresh victims killed to appease the sacrificer-god. Indeed, insofar as the transcendent is never grounded in one’s own death, death has to be delegated. It has to be through the sacrificial killing of someone else that the sacred is established.

This was what South Africa sought, through the TRC, to avoid. This is also what distinguishes the South African experiment from that of a country like

Israel. Indeed those states that define themselves mainly as victim-subjects (*sujets victimaires*) often appear too as subjects that can never stop miming death by sacrifice; subjects that can never stop inflicting on others all the acts of cruelty of which they were once themselves the expiatory victims.

Esprit: *On the question of memory and victimhood, is there a specifically black dimension, or are these specificities transcended?*

Achille Mbembe: It does not seem to me that black South Africans believe in a primary, endless mourning compared to which all other grief is merely “pagan”. Black South Africans do not think, either, that in order for their own past suffering to be acknowledged, it is necessary to deny the suffering of others or empty it of all human meaning. The politics of memory in South Africa is not about which human suffering should be de-historicized, sacralised and sanctified and which suffering is basically only of incidental significance, of no value on the scale of lives and deaths that truly matter. What the TRC has taught us is that every human life has a universal meaning, as has every death. The TRC has also taught us to free ourselves from the addiction to the memory of our own suffering if we are to achieve the project of freedom. Because freeing oneself from this addiction is the necessary condition for learning to speak a language of human mutuality again and, potentially, to create a new world and a new consciousness.

What is striking is that a considerable part of the work of memorialisation is being carried out with the aim of beginning everything again on the basis of a mutual recognition of the humanity of each and every one, and of the right of everybody to life in

freedom before the law. South Africa is still a long way from becoming an ethical community. But this is the project. The work of memorialisation translates, for instance, as the appropriate burial of the remains of those who died in the struggle, the erection of funeral steles where they fell, the consecration of rituals aiming at curing the survivors of anger and the desire for revenge, the creation of numerous museums and parks devoted to the celebration of people's common humanity. The work of memory is inseparable from meditation on the ways of interiorizing the presence of those who have been lost and reduced to dust. Meditation on this presence-absence, and on ways of symbolically restoring what has been destroyed, here in large part consists in giving the theme of the sepulchre its full subversive and insurrectionary force. The sepulchre in this instance is not so much the celebration of death as the reference to the extra bit of life that is needed to raise the dead from death itself.

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So, this is an approach that both embraces the fullness of life and seeks to transcend the question of particularity and singularity. It is not without its tensions and contradictions.

Esprit: *You have written a book, On the Postcolony. What is the relationship between your work and postcolonial thought?*

Achille Mbembe: This I have said many times. I am not a postcolonial thinker. There is a difference,

to my mind, between a critique of the “postcolony” and a critique of the “postcolonial”. The question running through my book is this: “What is ‘today’, and what are we, today?” What are the lines of fragility and precariousness, the fissures in contemporary African life? And, possibly, how could what is, be no more; or could it give birth to something radically else? And so, if you like, in *On the Postcolony*, I try to exit the Fanonian cul-de-sac: the dead end of the generalized circulation and exchange of death as the condition for human becoming. I am trying to suggest that a common thread between colonialism and what comes after colonialism is the precariousness of life. In a context of a life that is so precarious, disposing-of-death-itself could be the core of a veritable politics of freedom, of mutuality, of human proximity. A politics of freedom is a politics in which the old practice of human sacrifice is transcended. I am conscious of the fact that this is an unconditional utopia. Such unconditionality can only be expressed in a poetic, even dreamlike form.

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On the Postcolony is, on the other hand, concerned with memory but only insofar as the latter is a question, first of all, of responsibility towards oneself and towards an inheritance. I would say that memory is, above all else, a question of responsibility with respect to a name of which one is not the author. I believe that one only truly becomes a human being to the degree that one is capable of answering to what one is not the direct author of, to the person with whom one has, seemingly, nothing in common.

So there is no memory except in the assignation to responsibility.

Esprit: *What is postcolonial thinking's position with regard to Europe? Is it an anti-European current of thought or does it adopt European values? Shouldn't postcolonial thought also be understood as reflections on the de-centering of European thought?*

Achille Mbembe: Postcolonial thought is not anti-European. On the contrary, it is the product of the encounter between Europe and the world it once made into its distant possessions. It invites us to undertake an alternative reading of our common modernity. It calls upon Europe to live what it declares to be its origins, its future and its promise, and to live all of that responsibly. If, as Europe has always claimed, this promise has truly as its object the future of humanity as a whole, then postcolonial thought calls upon Europe to open and continually relaunch that future in a singular fashion, responsible for itself and before the Other.

But postcolonial thought is also a dream: the dream of a new form of critical humanism. It is the dream of a polis that is truly universal because it is ecumenical. It is what, in his poetical writings, Senghor hoped for: the “rebirth of the world” (*la renaissance du monde*), which he spoke of in his “Prayer to the Masks”.

Postcolonial thought, on the other hand, is a critique of history and responsibility. It is a critique of responsibility in terms of the obligation to answer for oneself, to be the guarantor of one's own actions. The ethics underlying this critique of responsibility is the future.

Esprit: *And the United States?*

Achille Mbembe: As far as I am concerned, the *différend* is about the way in which, historically, successive US governments have claimed to promote democracy and represent the “human” on the basis of crimes that are presented as so many earthly fulfillments of God’s Law and Divine Providence.

So, it is the political theology of the American State that is what many have a problem with insofar as the god it invokes is a melancholic and nostalgic god, irascible and vengeful. Mercy has no part in his laws and precepts. He is a jealous and unforgiving god, swift to destroy and forever requiring human sacrifice.

The critique of the political theology underpinning American power politics (hyper-hegemony) is absolutely necessary in the current climate. And in any case, the best critiques of this theology come from the United States itself. So, it is not the United States as such that people have a problem with, but an idea of politics and of the world that is closely associated with the history of the enemy – the enemy as an ontological, even theological category in the sense that the United States’ enemies are, as a matter of principle, always the enemies of God, and the hatred the United States feels for them is, necessarily, a divine hatred.

I do not think one can remake the world and “spread democracy” on that basis. The global politics of the United States often seeks to free itself from morality precisely when morality is constantly being invoked while immoral acts are being carried out. In the name of security, the US today seeks exemption from all responsibility. This politics of boundless irresponsibility must be subjected to a firm, intelligent and sustained critique.

*This interview was translated into Italian by Tatianna Silla and published in the critical journal **Aut Aut** in September 2008. It was also translated into Spanish by Autrey Torrecilla and Raul Rodriguez Freire, and it appeared in the Chilean journal **Indice** in 2008. The current English translation was done by John Fletcher for **Eurozine** (January 2008). The English version was reviewed by the Achille Mbembe for **The Johannesburg Salon** in July 2009.*