

# Review of: "From Necro-Politics to Necro-Ecology: framing the current climate environmental politics in the Americas"

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Simone Lucatello and Luiz Ricardo Fernandes Carril (2023) propose in their article an instigating reflection on political ecology in the Americas through the concept of necro-ecology. As they themselves define the concept, "necro-ecology can be therefore considered as the latest stage of the political ecology thinking in the region [this, in the Americas, but which, in fact, can be extended to the entire globe] and the necro politics dimensions, given not only the dramatic impacts of decision-making policies in the conservancy and nature preservation but also in the way current governments adopt decisions that can deeply affect in negative terms human beings and their relations with the ecosystems".

By presenting the concept of necro-ecology, the authors propose a new conceptual tool to think, in terms of Political Ecology [PE], the interactions between society, politics and government, and nature - a triad that is too simple, since each of these poles has its inherent singularities and contradictions. And that, in the name of a project, or even a utopia (we'll see why I say this below), democratic and of mutual respect for the plurality of voices, and to avoid becoming a technobureaucracy, it is important that Political Ecology recognizes the complexity inherent in that triad, since "the centrality of politics in society-nature relations can have significant theoretical and practical consequences, by allowing an articulation of perspectives of different 'social' issues, and the opening of a space for horizontal interpellations and plural statements" (Alimonda, 2005, p. 7).

Although the triad mentioned above is not of exclusive interest for the analysis of PE, it is important to emphasize that it is not a difficulty, but an epistemological peculiarity, as it dialogues deeply with other disciplines of the social sciences (Perreaut, Bridge, McCarthy, 2015), but also of a political singularity, since it remains attentive and open to plural voices, not only academic, but also governmental, and from activism and communities politically involved in the interaction between society and nature (Alimonda, 2005; Leff, 2015; Batterbury, 2015), especially when we are faced with the problems of environmental degradation (Alimonda, 2015).

I would like to propose some reflections from another discipline, that is, from philosophy. The intention is to contribute to the analytical-conceptual refinement implied in the concept of necro-ecology. And for that, I would like to revisit Foucault and Mbembe.

## Foucault and biopolitics

Although Foucault is not the creator of the concept of biopolitics (Esposito, 2004), he is the one who presents for the first time and unequivocally the paradoxical contradiction that moves it [and that can be expressed in the form of a question

How, in the name of life, can a policy of death be engendered? (Foucault, 2003). And he also makes it clear that death has to be understood in a broad sense, not just the physical one and that which concerns everyone as living beings, but also in a legal, political, cultural sense, etc., and how not to say also environmental. Although commentators generally only cite Nazism to exemplify the deadly contradiction of biopolitics, it must be remembered that Foucault gives two other historical examples: the Soviet gulags and the atomic bomb.

There are several ways to understand, or try to interpret, that paradox. In my view, one of the important elements is to understand that life and death have a “fluctuation of meanings” at the same time that they have a normative validity that is capital to the multiple strategies and biopolitical actions that have already been or that can still be put into practice: from those more frankly in favor of people's lives to those cynical policies of segregation, exclusion and de-subjective degradation. In one way or another, they are all deaths that blend into a political economy of lives, separated into those to be protected in the dignity of their recognized and grievable precariousness (Butler, 2004, 2009) and those that, although precarious, are justified as the price to be paid to guarantee the protection of the majority (Nalli, 2014). And provided a context of justification applied to the role of racism in the Nazi state.

*Genocide is justified by racism, but their functional and technological economy follow the pattern of biopower: it is the biopolitical strategies and relationships that determine how and under what conditions life can become a normative value – a desirable life – and, at the same time, how it settles which deviations and anomalies are undesirable or even noxious – an expendable life. If all these approaches seem to present the paradoxical framework of biopolitics – whose purpose is to promote life, but ultimately also produces death –, it is because of the immanent relationship between life and death that is evidenced in an undeniable way as a value for biopolitics. (Nalli, 2014, p. 215).*

Focusing on this paradoxical condition of the biopolitical logic is also important so that we do not simplify political relations only at the level of the State or, in a more Foucauldian language, of the state governmentalities. It is necessary to recognize how much this exercise of death, effectively provoked, or at least in a life awaiting its own fate, can be directly linked to great psychological and market interests. In such a way that, correlated to the State racism that Foucault spoke about, it is necessary to admit the contemporary possibility of a market racism, which kills, which segregates, which leaves to death (Nalli, 2022).

The reason for recovering a little of Foucault's analysis of biopolitics, in this context, is justified to question and perhaps even reinforce that the constant and progressive environmental degradation in all possible dimensions - water (rivers and oceans), air (climate change, pollution, etc.), land (from unregulated and polluting subsoil extractivism to the strenuous use of the soil in large-scale monocultures); urban, rural and forestry; physical, human, social, economic, cultural, symbolic, etc. – can finally be taken as necro-ecology. A necro-ecology that only considers life, despite all its multidimensionality of meanings and values, reduced to an economic and market index. Reduced to a financial and market value, endorsed by policies, or better said, by governments with mercantile interests, and negotiated from the concrete rudiments of a nugget, a water course, or noble woods smuggled from the forests, to figures ethereal on the stock exchanges.

This is one of the qualities and argumentative strength of Lucatello and Carril's article. Using the concept of necro-

ecology, they show how the unrestrained exploitation of nature, with the sole objective of enriching various financial agents, produces a multidimensional degradation, since it is evident not only in the environment and in rural areas, but it also negatively impacts the social and cultural relations of peoples and people, including in cities. These financial agents are often confused with the governments of many countries in the Americas - exercising this perfidious role, as in recent years the former presidents Bolsonaro in Brazil or Trump in the USA. But it is also necessary to pay attention to a considerable number of companies that act indirectly or directly in this unbridled extraction of the environment, simply aiming at their unbridled profit, in the same way that they sustain themselves economically and financially through strategies of racial segregation and even slavery practices during the 20th and 21st centuries (Nalli, 2022; Almeida, 2019; Santos, 2017).

### **Mbembe and necropolitics**

The authors of the article recall the importance of Foucault's influence on Achille Mbembe's thesis on necropolitics, to be able to define it as "the subjugation of life to the power of death" (Mbembe, 2019). However, in my view, there are details here that need to be considered more carefully so as not to run the risk of trivializing Mbembe's conceptual proposal. After all, if with Foucault, we have the paradox and contradiction inherent in well-defined biopolitics, the effort to create a neologism that the design is not Mbembe's alone. Giorgio Agamben had already done this when he proposed the term thanatopolitics (Agamben, 1998). How does the concept of necropolitics, proposed by Mbembe (2019) differ from that proposed by Agamben? My hypothesis is based exactly on the verb used for its definition: it is about ways and strategies of subjugation of life. More than being characterized as a power to kill, it is a power to threaten death. And how can this hypothesis be justified? For this, we need to return to Mbembe's text.

Mbembe makes clear in his essay what draws his attention. He says:

*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 the expression of a rupture between the impulses and interests of the body and those of the mind. Indeed, like the death camps, these figures constitute the nomos of the political space in which we continue to live. Furthermore, contemporary experiences of human destruction suggest that a reading of politics, sovereignty, and the subject may be developed that differs from the one bequeathed us by the philosophical discourse on modernity (Mbembe, 2019, p. 68).*

He uses three historical examples to situate the biopolitical experimentation of death. The first is that of slavery in the colonialist context of the plantation; the second concerns living conditions in the suburbs and ghettos (Township) or in rural areas (Homelands) in South Africa during Apartheid; and finally, the situation of the Palestinians, mainly in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, even today.

The slave, during colonialism on the plantations, is radically depersonalized, losing all the marks that characterize him as a subject and individual belonging to a community. He is subjected to such ontological violence that he cannot even be confused with the worker. He is just labor power and merchandise. He cannot be killed, rather he has to be kept alive. "As

a property, the slave has a value. The slave's labor is needed and used, so he is therefore kept alive, but in a *state of injury*, in a phantom-like world of horrors and intense cruelty and profanity" (Mbembe, 2019, p.75). In turn, in the case of South Africa, and more recently that of the Palestinians in the territories occupied by the State of Israel, as it lasts until today, what we have is, through the mark of racialization, the convergence between massacre and bureaucracy. The most important thing is to perceive the role of the colony there as imprecise borders between Western societies, highly standardized and "according to the law" and the anomic, disorganized, and exception zones that reign, compromising all human existence.

*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. The colony is thus the site par excellence where 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" (Mbembe, 2019, p.77).*

Still on the idea of borders, Mbembe observes in *Brutalisme* (2020) that

*It is increasingly the proper name of the organized violence that underlies contemporary capitalism and the order of our world in general [...] In effect, everything takes us back to the border, this zero point of non-relationship and denial of the very idea of common humanity, of a planet, the only one we would have, that we would share together (Mbembe, 2020).*

Recognizing this trait of "bordering" as a process of violence that removes any relationship, or that maintains the relationship in a form of its negation, can become very important for thinking about necro-ecology. After all, it is necessary to consider in terms of political ecology, in that triad between nature, society and politics, the fracture between urban and rural, or even between economic development (which obviously involves agricultural production, but also technological and industrial development) and the preservation of the environment. How can one not glimpse a blatant and vexatious indication of necro-ecology when the minister of the environment of the then Bolsonaro government, in Brazil, suggested at an inter-ministerial meeting in April 2020 that attention be paid to the problems of the pandemic with covid -19 to "pass the cattle"? (Menegassi, 2021).

The importance of paying attention to this border fracture is important to critically analyze not only deforestation and the expropriation of natural resources, but also, consequently, the social, cultural, and ethnic expropriations of the peoples that inhabit the Americas, whether they are the native peoples or not, whether they live in the fields or in the cities. Which has disastrous consequences for environmental regulations in the face of pressure and business lobbying for the unbridled extraction of mineral wealth or the deforestation of forests. As well as the violation of human rights of different peoples, natives, "quilombolas", riverside people who inhabit those enclaves under threat.

*endangering all other ways of living – at least the one that we were encouraged to think of as possible, in which there was co-responsibility for the places where we live and respect for the right to life of beings, and not just that abstraction that we allow ourselves to constitute as a humanity, which excludes all others and all other beings (Krenak, 2019, p. 47).*

However, there is one aspect that seems to me not to have been considered by the authors of the article, and which in

my view may be the subject of consideration, analysis and interpretation by them – which I only put as a suggestion for future considerations.

I am referring to the impacts of the environmental policy of several countries – to stay only in the Americas – often supported and financed by business interests in neo-extractivism, uncontrolled exploration and without any government regulation of the natural wealth of countries, mainly in Latin America. These impacts are noticed and felt in many ways: environmental degradation; deforestation and rampant soil, water and air pollution; disrespect and violence against all forms of existence of the peoples that inhabit the continent. And here is the point I miss: the deleterious impact on urban space, with high population density, intolerable levels of pollution and economic and social misery; poor housing conditions; high rates of violence, etc. And the city becomes, for years, decades and even centuries, a great necropolitical and necro-ecological monster, phagocytosing everything and everyone to remain as such from its structures of social foundation and expelling its waste in its surroundings (Pérez, 2021).

Therefore, it is necessary to think about space and the environment in a broader perspective, which forces one to (re)think the border not as a ban on any and all relationships. Not as a wall and a fence and barbed wire, but as a door and a window, always open to others who come and share the same place, the same space, the same world. What is nothing more than a fundamental and urgent task in these necro-political and necro-economic times, but also necro-ecological ones, is to help create what the geographer Milton Santos called banal spaces, that is, to help maximize the “possibilities of affirming ways of living whose solidarity is based on contiguity, on solidary neighborhood, that is, on shared territory” (Santos, 1998, p. 19).

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