

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

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This essay takes important steps toward a much-needed development of biopolitical thinking into the realm of ecology, which has, with important exceptions, in many ways long been a blind spot for the theoretical approach. It seems immediately clear that the growing devastation of environmental catastrophe, coordinated (and uncoordinated) by forms of governance and their interfacing with corporate and commercial actors is readable as an aspect of contemporary necropolitics—climate disaster (read largely as metonymic for ecology here) has become a global apparatus of death-making. What is less clear, though, is how exactly the necro-ecological framework proposed by the authors fits into the trajectory of biopolitical/necropolitical thought, and why its adoption as a productive mode of responding to the ecological crisis is needed.

Much of this is due, in my estimation, to certain limits to the necropolitical approach itself. Mbembe had a definite project in mind when he proposed his revision of Foucault, and this project should be more clearly outlined here to help the reader understand why the “necro” framework, as opposed to the “bio” framework, is more useful. But there seem to be bounds to how far we can usefully extrapolate necropolitics; if every aspect of widespread death-making is viewed as a purely negative phenomenon, its function can eventually be reduced to a negative diagnostics, which, taken to its end, can look a lot like nihilism. Agamben is brought into this conversation on negative biopolitics here, appropriately so, but it’s worth considering the outcomes of his own thoroughgoing negativity on the subject of the ubiquity of the state of exception and homo sacerization. His work on the COVID pandemic, for instance, starkly portrays one sad endgame of negative biopolitics as a tool of analysis in the form of a pseudo-libertarian conspiracy theorization and hopelessness.

And yet, Agamben has retained the framework of biopolitics, rather than necropolitics, and in his earlier work it’s easy to see how this has been productive in a manner more clearly indebted to Foucault. Foucault’s understanding of biopower, like his understanding of power in general, was never as a negative or positive project, but as an ambivalent one. Negative biopolitics—and of course the idea of mass devastation brought about through the workings of biopower would hardly have been unimaginable to Foucault—is still biopolitics under this perspective, because even in its wanton destruction of life it is also productive of life. The question, though, is in what kinds of life are destroyed, and what kinds preserved. For this reason Agamben speaks in *The Open* of the “anthropological machine,” whereby the impoverishment of nonhuman life is also the production of what comes to be understood as human life.

So the question then remains here: if ecological governance should be read as an operation of biopower, or as a derivative or offspring of biopower, what productive work is it doing? How can we diagnose its relation to life if we cannot

see what life it makes possible? If we understand it only or primarily as having a relation to death, how do we extract ourselves from it? These are questions prompted by this article that are eminently worth asking, but they are obscured by an approach overly committed to the condemnation of poor ecological governance. From this perspective, necro-ecology seems like merely the wanton carelessness of the self-interested; certainly it *is* this, but if that is to be the endpoint of the analysis it cannot tell us much more than we already know, at least from a theoretical and ethical standpoint. How are we to respond to this necro-ecology? Where should our analysis go next from here? These questions are left largely unanswered, and their necropolitical framing has the dangerous potential result of a negativity that is ultimately counterproductive. The article's closing urges "the need to act urgently," but given the preceding it's difficult to perceive in what manner action should be undertaken, if we are each trapped in a hemispheric system of death-production on a massive and legally-enshrined scale.

Some of these concerns in the article's argument are structural: the authors are clearly committed to a necropolitical diagnosis, and I would not argue that necro-ecology must be thought instead as bio-ecology (though I'd be interested in seeing where this might take the analysis). Yet it would help a great deal in clarifying why the necropolitical approach is necessary if more work was done early in the essay to clarify the need for this shift. This would involve a deeper engagement with both Foucault and Mbembe at the essay's early stages: what were the impetuses and historical frameworks for the emergence of these intertwined theories? What are the ecological gaps in their thinking that this article fills? Why is the new coinage necessary, rather than just thinking negative ecology as an aspect of necropolitics writ large? It might make sense to flip the first two sections here, setting up the background and stakes for the theoretical intervention before sketching out the scope of the essay that follows. There are also scattered typos here that make another round of revisions necessary, and some inconsistent citational practice (the frequent resort to "personal elaboration" as a source seems to me unusual and unclear).

That material that fills out the body of the article does definite productive ecological work—bringing the ecological policies (or lack thereof) across the Americas into conversation with one another is essential critical labor. Likewise, the moves to connect bio/necropolitical thinking with Latin American theory and other critical modes that often fall outside the sometimes-Eurocentric parameters of biopolitical theory are very welcome. The overall approach—bringing biopolitics to bear upon climate catastrophe—is absolutely crucial, and I am highly appreciative of the authors for undertaking this work. In its current state, however, the ultimate contribution that this approach might make, both to biopolitical theory and to ecocritical analysis, is not yet clear.