

# Thoughts on the planetary: An interview with Achille Mbembe

Focusing on the global implications of decolonisation, Achille Mbembe calls for the reformation of reason as a shared human faculty towards repairing and caring for life.

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Achille Mbembe first visited Norway on the occasion of the annual Holberg Debate organised by the Holberg Prize Secretariat at the University of Bergen on 1 December 2018 where he gave a [keynote address](#). Mbembe is scheduled to give three invited lectures on “[Bodies as Borders](#)” at the House of Literature in Oslo on 13 and 14 September 2019.

*This interview was conducted in Bergen, Norway, on 30 November 2018 by Torbjørn Tumyr Nilsen of the Norwegian newspaper Klassekampen. It is published here for the first time.*

**Nilsen: In April 2015, the Rhodes statue fell in South Africa at the University of Cape Town. How did you interpret that event?**

Mbembe: For those who are not aware of who we are talking about, Cecil John Rhodes was a privateer. He was a ruthless actor in the mercantile expansionism that characterised 19th century settler colonialism in the southern part of Africa. Through political alliances, sheer brutality and expediency, he carved out for himself a huge chunk of South Africa’s mineral wealth, in particular diamonds in Kimberley

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and gold in the Witwatersrand. He bestowed some of the land he had grabbed in Cape Town to the university which, in return, erected a statue in his honour on the steps of one of its main buildings.

Rhodes prefigured the extraction and privatisation of ill-gotten wealth neoliberalism today has pushed to a refinement unseen in the history of humankind. He was a precursor of the type of predatory economic system and plutocratic politics at work in most parts of the world today, the results of which are the raping of the biosphere and the destruction at a massive scale of the basic conditions of life on Earth.

I interpret the toppling of his statue as a small, symbolic victory, in the long and protracted struggle for universal justice.

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**Nilsen: So there is a lineage from Rhodes to the neoliberal order we see today?**

Mbembe: There is an explicit kinship between plantation slavery, colonial predation and contemporary forms of resource extraction and appropriation. In each of these instances, there is a constitutive denial of the fact that we, the humans, coevolve with the biosphere, depend on it, are defined with and through it and owe each other a debt of responsibility and care.

An important difference is the technological escalation that has led to the emergence of computational capitalism in our times. We are no longer in the era of the machine but in the age of the algorithm. Technological escalation, in turn, is threatening to turn us all into artefacts – what I have called elsewhere “the becoming-black-of-the world” – and to make redundant a huge chunk of the muscular power capitalism relied upon for a long time. It follows that today, although its main target remains the human body and earthly matter, domination and exploitation are becoming increasingly abstract and reticular. As a repository of our desires and

emotions, dreams, fears and fantasies, our mind and psychic life have become the main raw material which digital capitalism aims at capturing and commodifying.

During Rhodes' times, the exploitation of black labour went hand in hand with a virulent form of racism. Contemporary capitalism still relies on racial subsidies. But the technologies of racialisation have become ever more insidious and ever more encompassing. As the world becomes a huge data emporium, tomorrow's technologies of racialisation will be more and more generated and instituted through data, calculation and computation. In short, racism is relocating both underneath and at the surface of the skin. It reproduces itself via screens and mirrors of various kinds. It is becoming both spectral and fractal.

Otherwise, as far as the toppling of Rhodes' statue is concerned, my argument has always been that the statue should have never been there in the first instance.

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#### **Nilsen: As a symbol?**

Mbembe: Yes, as a reminder of the various crimes this cruel man committed in his attempt to deny black people any right to a human future in South Africa. As a reminder, too, of the cynicism with which he tried to launder his ill-gotten wealth under the guise of philanthropy.

But a proper critique of Rhodes' style of predatory economics and plutocratic politics cannot be limited to South Africa alone or to the confines of a specific nation-state. The project he served was colonial and imperial. Its horizon was not South Africa-centric. Ultimately, Rhodes is the symbol of the double damage capitalism in its racial, colonial and imperial form inflicted upon humankind and upon the biosphere. Such should be the starting point of any critique of Rhodes which strives to avoid the pitfalls of national chauvinism.

**Nilsen: At the Holberg Debate at the University of**

**Bergen tomorrow, you will discuss social movements through history. How will you describe this social movement, compared to, for example, the student movements in the late 1960s?**

Mbembe: These are two different events. They are happening at two different historical moments in two different places. I am not even sure that contemporary protagonists have any knowledge or memory of what happened in 1968.

If my understanding is correct, one of the goals pursued by the decolonisation movement in South Africa is to unbundle what is perceived as a structure of repetition, an old racial order which keeps donning the mantle of the new in its attempt at masking its degeneracy. In this context, to dismantle “whiteness” implies the awakening to self-knowledge and the reshaping of institutions inherited from a brutal past. In this sense, the decolonisation project is both a critique of institutions and a critique of knowledge.

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The actual question is whether in this instance, such a critique has been articulated in a way that is intellectually and politically compelling. Indeed with the drive towards the automatising of existence, contemporary social movements operate in a context characterised by huge changes in human experience. It is not only that the economy is becoming the eminent site of the new struggles for life. It is also that people and things, nature and objects, we are all increasingly at risk of being transformed into artefacts.

Many of these changes are partly enabled by the technological escalation represented by ubiquitous computing. A major consequence of this “great transformation” is that the human of the first quarter of the 21st century is not exactly the human of the late 1960s. The modes of individuation are not the same. Nor are the forms of subjectivation or its content. The complex entanglement of the human and the technological so typical of our age has deeply transformed the ways in which cognitive processes

unfold, how people dream and what kind of change they dream about, in short, how the political is configured and experienced. In assessing the qualities and properties of contemporary mobilisations, we must therefore factor in the impact of media technologies on the formation of political subjectivity.

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Striking in this regard is the apparent shift from a politics of reason to a politics of experience, if not of viscerality. In the eyes of many, personal experience has become the new way of being at home in the world. It's like the bubble that holds the foam at a distance. Experience nowadays trumps reason. We are led to believe that sensibility, emotions, affect, sentiments and feelings are the real stuff of subjecthood and therefore of radical agency. Paradoxically, in the paranoid tenor of our epoch, this is very much in tune with the dominant strictures of neoliberal individualism. It is also in line with the ongoing reconfigurations of the relation between technology, reason and other human faculties.

Whatever the case, this has given rise to ambiguous forms of collective mobilisation, most of which we shouldn't romanticise. Behind the mask of radicalism, there is something fundamentally ambivalent in the political discourse of decolonisation when, for instance, the injunction to decolonise goes hand in hand with high tolerance for xenophobia or the desire to control and defend what amounts to inverse racial borders. There is something fundamentally debilitating when subaltern resistance politics is limited to an endless performance of purity and self-righteousness, or to a competition about who has suffered the most on the spiralling scale of victimisation.

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The same pathos is to be found in most debates on curriculum reform, on what we must or must not read and why, in short, on how to reconfigure or redesign the archive. Although fought in the name of equality and justice, some of these mobilisations might end up reenacting a sectarian logic of enclosure, underpinned as they are by flawed notions of identity, gender or culture as spaces of protection and immunity, as borders which allow for a closing off from “those who are not as radical as us”.

Finally, a number of these mobilisations grant a preeminent status to notions of self and experience. The idea according to which self and experience – or for that matter radical agency – must now be found in the intimate microspheres of everyday life must be subjected to a thorough critique. Too often, it is presumed that our intimate interiorities, our moods, our states of mind are “safe spaces”, the only spaces immune to racism and neoliberal intoxication. In fact, under contemporary conditions, there is no longer any “zone of being” that is free from “contamination”.

The political cannot be reduced to the painstaking management of emotionally safe spaces and shared atmospheres. Radical agency is not about the sharing of boundaries. It is about deborderisation. It is simply not true that unless I have undergone the exact same experience as the other, I know nothing about his or her pain and should simply shut up. Insofar as to be human is to open oneself up to the possibility always already there of becoming (an)other, such a conception of self and identity is by definition antihuman. The political in our time must start from the imperative to reconstruct the world in common. For the idea of decolonisation to have any purchase at a planetary scale, it cannot start from the assumption that I am purer than my neighbour.

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**Nilsen: By using the term “planetary scale” here, I take it that you see this decolonisation movement as important also on a global scale?**

Mbembe: I am arguing that for the idea of decolonisation to truly become a political, theoretical or aesthetic force on a global scale, a number of conditions must be met and a lot of work still needs to be done. For the time being, it is mostly a legitimate aspiration and, in some unfortunate instances, a compensatory discourse.

Decolonisation never meant the return to some egosphere or to some elective self-image that would procure a stable identity, protection, safety and security and eventually immunity to an embattled self. The search for safety and immunity and the fear of risk so typical of this age is not at all part of, say, Frantz Fanon's decolonisation lexicon which is all about undergoing a trial, or even facing an ordeal.

Furthermore, historically the expansion of colonialism had to do with the broader question, Who is it that the Earth belongs to? That was the key question underlying colonial conquest and imperial expansion since the 15th century. With the partition of Africa in the 19th century, European powers had decided that the Earth in its entirety belonged to them. They were its true owners, and they could occupy lands that were populated by foreign people. They could exploit these lands as well as the people who had always inhabited them, thereby carving out spheres of influence each of them had control over.

To a large extent, colonial expansion was a planetary project. Although driven in large part by national states and national business companies, it mostly had to do with the reallocation of the Earth's resources and their privatisation by those who had the greatest military might and the largest technological advantage. This is why in its most historical sense, decolonisation is by definition a planetary enterprise, a radical openness of and to the world, a deep breathing for the world as opposed to insulation.

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**Nilsen: And cynicism?**

Mbembe: And cynicism, of course. And racism. Because

racism is in the DNA of colonialism. There is no colonialism that doesn't entail a huge dose of structural racism. And there is no colonialism neither that is not driven, let's say, by some form or another of a genocidal impulse.

This genocidal potential can be actualised or it might not, but it is always there. It is there as Hannah Arendt shows in her own work on race and bureaucracy. This genocidal potential was put to work in the Americas, in Australia. It was put to work by the Germans in Namibia. So it is always there. Because where there is racism, this genocidal potential exists. Where there is racism, being-in-the-world is the same thing as being-against-others. The latter are treated as a threat against which one's own existence must be defended. At all cost, if necessary.

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**Nilsen:Some would then argue that there are still colonial or postcolonial structures operating in the neoliberal project. Would you say that there is then still a genocidal potential?**

Mbembe: Perhaps more than at any other moment in our recent past, we are increasingly faced with the question of what to do with those whose very existence does not seem to be necessary for our reproduction; those whose mere existence or proximity is deemed to represent a physical or biological threat to our own life.

Throughout history, and in response to this question, various paradigms of rules have been designed for human bodies deemed either in excess, unwanted, illegal, dispensable or superfluous. One historical response has consisted in putting in place spatial exclusionary arrangements. Such was, for instance, the case during the early phases of modern settler or genocidal colonialism in relation to Native American reservations in the United States, island prisons, penal colonies such as Australia, camps and even Bantustans in South Africa.

Two late modern examples are Gaza and the encaging of

migrant children in the context of the ongoing planetary war on mobility. Gaza and the encaging of migrant children might well prefigure what is yet to come.

In the case of Gaza, control of vulnerable, unwanted, surplus or racialised people is exercised through a combination of tactics, chief among which is modulated blockade or *molecular strangulation*. A blockade prohibits, obstructs and limits who and what can enter and leave the Strip. The goal might not be to cut the Strip off entirely from supply lines, infrastructural grids or trade routes. The Strip is nevertheless relatively sealed off and strangled in a way that effectively turns it into an imprisoned territory. Comprehensive or relative closure is accompanied by periodic military escalations and the generalised use of extrajudicial assassinations. Spatial violence, humanitarian strategies and a peculiar biopolitics of punishment all combine to produce, in turn, a peculiar carceral space in which people deemed surplus, unwanted or illegal are governed through abdication of any responsibility for their lives and their welfare.

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But as I have intimated, there is another, early 21st century example, which consists in waging new forms of wars, which can be called wars on speed and mobility. Wars on mobility are wars whose aim is to turn discounted bodies into borders. They generally begin by turning into dust and piles of ruins the milieu as well as means of existence and survival of vulnerable people thus forced to flee in search of a refuge. These kinds of wars against milieu and ecosystems rendered toxic and uninhabitable are not accidental. They are methodically programmed and conducted. Such milieu and ecosystems are sites of experimentation of new weapons. The targets of this kind of warfare are not by any means singular bodies, but rather great swathes of humanity judged worthless and superfluous.

**Nilsen: Can you elaborate a bit more on that?**

Mbembe: Let me put it differently. Nowadays, the project is

to render as many people as superfluous as possible. The novelty is the production at a massive scale of discounted bodies, a residual humanity that is akin to waste. With our entry into a new climatic regime, this process will only intensify. As the global conditions for the production and reproduction of life on Earth keeps changing, population politics at a planetary level will increasingly become synonymous with excess and waste management. In terms of the future geopolitics of our world, populations will be more and more treated not only in the Darwinian terms of sexual selection, but also within an utilitarian and bio-physiologico-organic framework.

Take a place such as South Africa where a very high percentage of the total population is unemployed. This is not because there is no “work as such”. This is not because people do not want to work.

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In fact, here as elsewhere in Africa and other parts of the global South, almost everything remains to be done. The amount of work needed in order to create a better life for all is incalculable. But the structure of the economy doesn't really need us all. Nor does it need our time. It doesn't really need every single body, all of our muscles or energies or even the bulk of our social and collective intelligence. And this will be more and more the case in the future, as we move to a phase of human history in which only that which is computable counts. As we speak, many bodies already fall beyond the scope of calculation. Unless we reinvent the terms of what counts and in the process resignify what value stands for as well as the procedures of assigning value, of measuring value, of exchanging value, things won't change. These are some of the key questions any decolonisation project worthy of its name has to address if the injunction to decolonise is to be more than a mere ideological phantasm.

**Nilsen: Back to the debate on decolonisation. There was a heated debate in Norway, during the summer of 2018, about the decolonisation of academia. How can #RhodesMustFall in South Africa be relevant for**

## universities worldwide?

Mbembe: The need for a critical reappraisal of the relationship between knowledge, power and institutions is not an exclusively South African preoccupation. In South Africa, the term “decolonisation” is one way in which concerns about “deracialisation” are expressed. The imperative to “deracialise” is also valid for Europe, for the United States, for Brazil and for other parts of the world. The emergence of new varieties of racism in Europe and elsewhere, the reassertion of global white supremacy, of populism and retro-nationalism, the weaponisation of difference and identity are not only symptoms of a deep distrust of the world. They are also fostered by transnational forces capable of making that same world inhospitable, uninhabitable and unbreathable for many of us.

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All of this is, of course, important. But part of what truly frightens me is the recolonisation of various fields of knowledge by all kinds of determinisms. What frightens me is the active confusion between knowledge and data, the reduction of knowledge to information. It's the idea that the world is a matter of numbers and the task of knowledge is to handle quantities. Furthermore, it's the belief that the best way to generate information is with computers and that which is not computable does not exist. It's the creeping sense that the computer is our new brain.

In such a context, “to decolonise” must start from the assumption that knowledge cannot be reduced to computational information processing. There is therefore a massive need to recover the ability to think. And for me, knowledge is on the verge of being reduced to a reified metaphor. As a result, we are witnessing almost everywhere a tremendous impoverishment of thought.

**Nilsen: In the Norwegian debate on decolonisation, one of the demands from the young student activists was to have a more global curriculum. What's your take on that?**

Mbembe: Right now we are literally assaulted by forces that want to retreat from the world and rebuild a certain idea of the nation, of the community, of identity and difference that is premised on the capacity to determine who belongs, who must be excluded and shouldn't belong, who can settle where, why, how and for how long. Such forces are preoccupied with the erection of all kinds of borders and how they must be policed. They buy in the dream of a "pure" community, a community of people who look the same and act the same. They are sustained by the belief that we can go back to the past because the past is, in truth, our future. Let me just call it the dream of apartheid.

There is another dream, maybe not unrelated to the first. As I have just highlighted, it's the dream of reducing knowledge to calculation by computers. In fact, it's the dream of reducing everything to calculation and explaining everything from within biological and neurological strictures. A planetary library, archive or, for that matter, curriculum is one whose strategic project is to understand the incalculable and the incomputable. It can only be based on the will to go beyond cognitivism. I am not against calculation or mathematics. Nor am I against computation. I am simply saying that neither calculation, nor mathematics, nor computation are sufficient for explaining life. It can't be enough to do correct mathematics. Once we have done correct mathematics, we still need to determine what this exercise implies for the life of beings. Pushed to a certain level, correct mathematics alone impoverishes thought and destroys theory.

Otherwise, we only have one world. We might dream about colonising Mars or Venus or other unknown planets in the future, but for the time being that is not part of our actuality. We only have one world, one solar system and for this world to last as long as possible and for this solar system to not calcinate life as such, we need to become a bit more intelligent and wiser. This Earth is our shared roof and our shared shelter. Sharing this roof and shelter is the great condition for the sustainability of life on Earth. We have to share it as equitably as possible. And, in any case, our lives, here and elsewhere, have become so entangled, that trying to separate them will require a tremendous amount of violence. It will require a lot of violence to disentangle humanity from itself and from the rest of the living species. And therefore, especially in the face of the kinds of ecological challenges we face, it is absolutely important to reinvent forms of life in common that go beyond the

requisite of the nation state, ethnicity, race, religion, and so on. A curriculum that takes seriously such concerns is absolutely necessary.

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**Nilsen: And you see these two forces visible in the debate on the composition of the curriculum?**

Mbembe: Yes, I do. I would go further and argue that to design a truly planetary curriculum implies salvaging whatever remains of reason as a shared human faculty. To be sure and in view of its own history of violence and unreason, reason must be reformed. But I cannot possibly see how, without it, we can adequately answer one of the most urgent questions that will haunt the human race in this century – *the question of life futures*.

For a long time, we have been concerned with how life emerges and the conditions of its evolution. The key question today is how it can be repaired, reproduced, sustained and cared for, made durable, preserved and universally shared, and under what conditions it ends. Overall, these debates about how life on Earth can be reproduced and sustained and under what conditions it ends are forced upon us by the epoch itself, characterised as it is by the impending ecological catastrophe and by technological escalation. I am not sure that they can be properly answered from a purely market logic perspective that addresses *life as a commodity* to be manipulated and replicated under conditions of volatility.

On the other hand, there is a shifting distribution of powers between the human and the technological in the sense that technologies are moving towards “general intelligence” and self-replication. Over the last decades, we have witnessed the development of algorithmic forms of intelligence. They have been growing in parallel with genetic research, and often in its alliance. The integration of algorithms and big data analysis in the biological sphere does not only bring with it a greater and greater belief in techno-positivism and modes of statistical thought. It also paves the way for

regimes of assessment of the natural world, and modes of prediction and analysis that treat *life itself as a computable object*.

Concomitantly, algorithms inspired by the natural world, and ideas of natural selection and evolution are on the rise. Such is the case with genetic algorithms. As Margarida Mendes (“Molecular Colonialism”) has shown, the belief today is that everything is *potentially computable and predictable*. In the process, what is rejected is the fact that life itself is an open system, nonlinear and exponentially chaotic.

I keep raising these issues because they are not unrelated to a *problématique* of “decolonisation” that would not be a mere ideological phantasm. In fact, these issues may be symptomatic of a truly momentous event we might not be willing or ready to contemplate. Reason may well have reached its final limits. Or, in any case, reason is on trial. On the one hand, it is increasingly replaced and subsumed by instrumental rationality when it is not simply reduced to procedural or algorithmic processing of information. In other words, the logic of reason is morphing from within machines and computers and algorithms while the human brain is being “downloaded” into nano-machines and all kinds of devices.

As we are increasingly surrounded by multiple and expanding wavefronts of calculation, all we are willing to ask from it is to detect patterns or to recover artifacts whose existence is derived from financial models built on technologies of miniaturisation and automation. As a result, *techne* is becoming the quintessential language of reason, its only legitimate manifestation. Furthermore, instrumental reason, or reason in the guise of *techne* is increasingly *weaponised*. Life itself is increasingly construed via statistics, metadata, modelling, mathematics.

If my description of current trends is accurate, then one of the questions a planetary curriculum must ask is the following: What remains of the human subject in an age when the instrumentality of reason is carried out by and through information machines and technologies of calculation?

The second is: Who will define the threshold or set the boundary that distinguishes between the calculable and the incalculable, between that which is deemed worthy and that

which is deemed worthless, and therefore dispensable?

The third is whether we can turn these new instruments of calculation and power into instruments of liberation. In other words, will we be able to invent different modes of measuring that might open up the possibility of a different aesthetics, a different politics of inhabiting the Earth, of repairing and sharing the planet?

**Nilsen:But what about those who are concerned about loosening texts from canonised European theorists and thinkers in this process?**

Mbembe:I am talking about expanding the archive, not excising it. For this to happen, it must be clear to all that the European archive alone can no longer account for the complexities, both of history, of the present, and of the future of our human and other-than-human world. What we all inherit are the archives of the world at large. Not just one kind of archive. For me, this is a matter of common sense. I am in favour of expanding the archive, reading the different archives of the world critically, each with and against the others. There can't be any other meaning to a planetary curriculum.

**Nilsen: In all fields?**

Mbembe:In all fields. Naturally. In any subject that has any impact whatsoever on the future history of the world and of life. Or let me put it this way: I feel sorry for any young person who might go through the Norwegian educational system without ever having learned anything about Africa, Asia or China, without having read any African, Indian or Chinese novels or poetry, or without having studied any African, Japanese or Chinese thinker of note. I am deeply sorry for that person. His or her situation makes me genuinely sad. For it is a kind of mental self-amputation, a form of active or passive rejection of the world. The purpose of a planetary curriculum would be to cure our souls from such human-inflicted ills.

**Nilsen:In the debate in Norway, the demand for a more global curriculum was labelled by detractors as a campaign for “identity politics”. How do you see this argument?**

Mbembe:It is a mischaracterisation of what is at stake. Because that is not what it is. Actually, it is not about

identity politics. It's about the challenges we spoke about earlier. It is about how we locate ourselves in the world today. In a world that has to be sustainable, that has to be built in common. It has nothing to do with the dream of apartheid.

There is a critique of "identity politics" that is a right-wing critique. It usually comes from those forces that have used the trope of identity precisely to oppress and exclude certain people, to racialise and dehumanise them. Identity politics has historically been used the most by those who were keen to stigmatise different "races", those who in the first place did not believe in our common humanity. They worshipped difference, which they weaponised.

The drama is that the people who were thus objectified and pushed aside, unfortunately embraced these prejudices and internalised them, as Frantz Fanon and many others have shown. In their attempt to reclaim a voice, they ended up defining themselves in the terms of the "difference" to which they had been assigned. So when we say "identity politics", we have to know exactly what is the historical genealogy of this term, and who is practicing it. Those who are practicing it are, for instance, those who, when a black African lands at an airport in Norway, in the midst of a group of many other people, select exactly that person and racially "profile" him or her.

To talk about a planetary curriculum has nothing to do with racially profiling people or texts or archives. It has to do with bringing as equitably as possible everybody, every person and every text, every archive and every memory in the sphere of care and concern. It has to do with proximity as opposed to insulation, with the invention in common of a shared inside, a shared roof and a shared shelter.

**Nilsen: Did "racial profiling" happen to you at a Norwegian airport?**

Mbembe: For many people of African descent travelling in the world today, these are regular occurrences. I don't want to say more than that.

But since you opened that door, it seems to me that identity politics and other forms of the politics of difference, that is the new opium for the masses. By expressing myself in this way, I am in no way trying to hurt many people who, today, must still fight to reclaim a voice or to recover a face we can

truly identify as a human voice and a human face.

What I mean is that in this age of globalised capitalism, identity is increasingly used both as a weapon to further brutalise the weakest in our midst and as a leverage to claim a status of pure or authentic victim. To have been brutalised or to have been victimised, in turn, is increasingly seen as the most potent way to claim one's rights or one's access to care, justice, redress or reparation. The question I would like to ask is, why is this the case? In the conditions of our times, what are the reasons why vengeance or vengefulness is increasing confused with justice? Is it because we have reached a point where the form of capitalism we live in, the kind of technological progress we have achieved, are no longer compatible with liberal democracies?

The two figures of identity politics I have highlighted will not save liberal democracy from its deadly entanglement with neoliberalism and retronationalism. We can direct as many people as we want to the things that ultimately don't matter – who is wearing a burka in public, who is sporting a Muslim beard, those foreigners who steal our jobs and “our women” and corrupt our culture – such subterfuges won't address what is at the core of the present malaise worldwide. They will only accentuate the present distress that many people feel, inflame negative passions and pave the way for brutalism.

**Nilsen: Also in your own country Cameroon you see these forms of identity politics?**

Mbembe: In Cameroon in particular, a similar pathos surrounds the question of identities and languages inherited from colonialism. One of the ongoing disputes is about who is more British than French or more French than British. It is totally absurd. Having said that, the question we need to ask is the following: Why is it that various struggles for selfhood and common rights necessarily express themselves in these exclusionary idioms? Why are they not conducted in terms other than those that merely mimic the very categories of oppression? Why do people keep colluding with the forces that objectively work against their own material self-interest? What are the forms of compensation or enjoyment they derive from what appears to be self-servitude?

**Nilsen: What is the solution then?**

Mbembe: We need to develop a better understanding of what

we are up against and throw out a number of old assumptions. This can't happen if we do not recover the faculty of critique, re-educate our desires and rehabilitate reason as a key faculty for any project of freedom or emancipation. Reason is under siege, reduced as it is to its instrumental dimension. It is being replaced by technicism on the one hand and all forms of negative passions on the other hand.

I am, of course, aware of the violent and tragic histories of reason and not only in our part of the world. So maybe it is more a matter of reforming reason than anything else. Maybe it's about educating reason to cohabit with other faculties. But I cannot see how we can possibly dismiss reason wholesale without deeply damaging the category of truth itself. I deeply believe that democracy cannot survive in the absence of reason, that we cannot share the world, repair it or properly take care of life in the absence of a reformed notion of reason, one that marries thinking, feeling and projecting.

**Nilsen: Another critique of the decolonisation movement in Norway was that this was smelling of "American campus activism" and that it was therefore not relevant for a Norwegian context.**

Mbembe: A proper critique of the decolonisation movement must be well informed. I myself have produced a number of critical observations relating to this project. It is true that there is a circulation of tropes, concepts and categories between activists in the United States and activists in the rest of the world. In the South African case, it is true that the movement has at times been tempted to rely wholesale on concepts and modes of action drawn from the African-American experience or lexicon, in particular insofar as the critique of race or even gender is concerned. This probably has to do with South Africa's own inability to theorise its own historical experience, to speak to its potential universality.

This having been said, But to our Norwegian friends, I would simply say this. On matters of decolonisation, you should invent forms of student activism relevant to your specific context. But to deny the necessity of decolonising is part of what Jean-Paul Sartre characterised as "bad faith".

**Nilsen: But underlying that argument is probably the idea that the Norwegian universities are not connected**

**to colonialism such as other universities in other countries might be.**

Mbembe: Throughout our conversation, I have tried to offer a theory of decolonisation that is as expansive as possible. Norway is not an island in the world. Norway is entangled with the rest of the world and has to respond to the address the rest of the world is putting to it. And it has to take this address very seriously, just as South Africa has to respond to the address that is put to her by the rest of the continent, by other parts of the world. That is how we will salvage reason and build a world that is sustainable.

**Nilsen: To what extent are our knowledge systems of today still determined by colonialism or oppression?**

Mbembe: We need to develop a broader understanding of “colonisation”. Knowledge systems worldwide are still underpinned by the logic of value extraction. In fact, knowledge as such is increasingly designed as the principal means for value extraction. Colonisation is going on when the world we inhabit is understood as a vast field of data awaiting extraction. Colonisation is going on when we throw out of the window the role of critical reason and theoretical thinking, and we reduce knowledge to the mere collection of data, its analysis and its use by governments, military bureaucracies and corporations. Colonisation is going on when we are surrounded by so-called smart devices that constantly watch us and record us, harvesting vast quantities of data, or when every activity is captured by sensors and cameras embedded within them. This is what colonisation in the 21st century is all about. It is about extraction, capture, the cult of data, the commodification of human capacity for thought and the dismissal of critical reason in favour of programming.

These are some of the issues the decolonisation project has to embrace if it is to be more than a slogan. Now more than ever before, what we need is a new critique of technology, of the experience of technical life. For all kinds of reasons. What we are witnessing, whether we see it or not, is the emergence of an entirely new species of humans. It is not the human of the Renaissance or of the 18th century, nor the human of the early or mid-20th century. It’s an entirely different species of human, which is coupled with it its object.

## Paulin Hountondji on philosophy and decolonisation

The distinctions we used to make between the human and the object are no longer entirely valid. Because nowadays there is no human being without its prosthesis. Our environment is not only saturated with all kinds of technological devices. In fact, we spend most of our lives living with or through screens. This experience has very serious implications in terms of the new natures of cognition, in terms of how we perceive things and reality itself, in terms of what it is that we know or must know, in terms of how we know what we know, in terms of the distinction between fact and fiction, matter and substance or in terms of the monopolisation of thought within technical infrastructures.

For “decolonisation” to be more than a slogan and be given an edge, we need to attend to these shifts, particularly in relation to the anthropocene as well as in relation to the reticular nature of computational technologies and the “softwarisation” of our existence and that of every other living entity on Earth. We must resist the push to reduce knowledge to what can be bought and sold and reinvent the category of “relevance”. This can only happen if we put a renewed emphasis on the questions of “ends”, and not only of “means”. Saying this, I am fully aware of the fact that our world is going through a period when nihilism is lurking, brutalism is the new norm and the desire for an apocalypse is not far.

**Nilsen: Recently you have also been writing about what you call “savage objects”. What does it mean that these objects are still in the possession of European museums and how can restitution be done in practice?**

Mbembe: This is a complex question that has been thoroughly studied by Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy. Together they have produced a compelling report on these matters, and I would advise anyone who is concerned about the ongoing presence of African objects in Western museums to read it. I have been trying to relate the call for restitution to broader questions of debt, reparation and universal justice.

In precolonial systems of African thought, restitution was an obligation in the case that a conscious, malicious and deliberate act of violation was undertaken on another's life. The most damaging wrongs were considered those causing harm to one's "vital force". In contexts such as these, where life was fragile or was liable to being diminished, every attack on the integrity and life force of being, human or any other entity, however slight, merited restoration.

The damages or injury could be calculated in economic terms. But in the last instance, damages, injury or loss were assessed according to a measure of the value of life. In line with this philosophy, veritable restitution is therefore one that participates in making reparations to life. The law subtending it is more person- than property-oriented. Wherever material damages and interests came into play, the only sense they had was to undertake that restoration of life.

Ultimately, no real restitution could occur without what we must indeed call avowal, that is to say, *the capacity to tell the truth*. From this viewpoint, to retribute was part of an unconditional duty – part of the infinitely irrecusable thing that is life, all life, of that form of debt that was the debt of truth.

The truth is that Europe took things from us that it will never be able to retribute. We will learn to live with this loss. Europe, for its part, will have to take responsibility for its acts, for that shady part of our shared history which it keeps denying or of which it has sought to divest itself. The risk is that by restituting our objects without giving an account of itself, it concludes that, with the restitution complete, our right to remind it of the truth is removed. If new ties are to be woven, Europe must honour the truth, as the truth is the teacher of responsibility. This debt of truth cannot be erased as a matter of principle. It will haunt us until the end of times.

Honouring truth comes with the commitment to learn and remember together. As Édouard Glissant never ceased to reiterate, each of us needs the memory of the other. This is not a matter of charity or compassion. It is a condition for the survival of our world. If we want to share the world's beauty, he would add, we ought to learn to be united with all its suffering. We will have to learn to remember together, and this doing, to repair together the world's fabric and its visage. Restitution will always be partial. There are

irreparable losses that no compensation can ever bring back – which does not mean it is not necessary to compensate. To have compensated, does not mean to have erased the wrong. To compensate, as Kwame Anthony Appiah underlines, is about offering to repair the relation.

*An early Norwegian version of the interview was first published by Klassekampen on 1 December 2018. The transcript has been edited, footnoted, referenced and amended for clarity by Sindre Bangstad, Research Professor, Institute For Church, Religion and Worldview Research in Oslo, Norway. Achille Mbembe has revisited the transcript and substantially amended it where necessary. It is now published with his consent.*

**Amendment, 5 September 2019:** *The date for the removal of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes from the campus of the University of Cape Town was corrected to April 2015.*

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