

Mbembe, Achille: *Critique of Black Reason*. Durham: Duke University Press 2017. ISBN: 978-0-8223-6343-9.

Rezensiert von: Diana Ayeh, Leipzig University

Besides its philosophical and historical strengths, it is above all the character of a political manifesto that makes Achille Mbembe's book an essential reading for all those interested in past and present forms of global capitalism. Departing from the birth of the racial subject (notably Blackness) and its linkages to the emergence of global capitalism, he demonstrates to what extent European liberalism went hand in hand with colonial expansion. The author is successful in challenging dominant notions of capitalism as an economic order that allows everyone to participate at free will and under equal conditions in the global market. Yet the book not only seeks to contribute to the history of global capitalism, it also points to the limits and scopes of Western metaphysics by emphasizing their racial foundations. Was it a coincidence of history that the Enlightenment era in Western Europe corresponded with the peak of the transatlantic slave trade? Mbembe clearly negates this question (p. 67), illustrating that Black humanity as such has been denied by colonizing nations for centuries. Political and philosophical protagonists of the Enlightenment era such as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, he states, claimed that the humanity is defined by possession of language and reason. Yet they denied that same humanity to Black populations (p. 85).

The book was originally published in French in 2013¹ and came, according to Mbembe, out of a „cycle of reflections“ (p. 8). Starting with his essays „On the Postcolony“ (2000), and „Sortir de la grande nuit“ (2010), the book is also inspired by his classes on Afropolitanism at Witwatersrand Institute for Social and Economic Research. The intellectual and historical scope, deepness and complexity of the essay are by no way incidental. The political theorist and public intellectual is today dealt as one of the most important philosophers of the African continent.² He is, indeed, one of the few public intellectuals of Af-

rican origin who are regularly present in the Western media landscape. In many of his essays and public statements, he describes and analyzes contemporary social and political issues, which become manifest under the global condition. „Critique of Black Reason“ therefore also touches on contemporary questions of migration regimes, global citizenship, and points to the emergence of the „new wretched of the world“ (p. 177).

In contrast to other postcolonial thinkers or pan-Africanist intellectuals, Achille Mbembe does not seek to completely provincialize European traditions of thought. Instead, he focuses on unveiling the existing relations of power, and internal frictions that are still part of today's claims to universalist humanism. This would be a necessary condition, in his eyes, to comply with „new demands of a possible universalism“ (p. 8). The book's approach therefore reflects on the one hand, a history of ideas in which Blackness figures at once as a symbol for destruction (due to slavery and exploitation), and as a desire for life (due to the various liberation and independence movements). On the other hand, the book features a history of a political-economic complex that is racial domination. Mbembe illustrates how ascriptions of racial supremacy functioned as both an ideology and a technology of governance (p. 34). His mapping of the global world order, yet, does not limit itself to historical manifestations of „racial capitalism“ (p. 136). After the abolition of slavery, colonialism and apartheid, and in an era of neo-liberalism in which „Europe is no longer the center of gravity of the world“ (p. 1), Mbembe observes a „Becoming Black of the world“ (p. 1; p. 6; p. 179). New imperial practices of capture, predation, extraction and asymmetrical warfare would converge with new spatial enclosures, and imply, as a result, a „[...] tendency to universalize the Black condition.“ (p. 4).

The first four chapters of „Critique of Black Reason“ mainly map out when, where and how the notions of Blackness and Africa ser-

¹ Mbembe Achille, *Critique de la raison nègre*. Paris, La Découverte, 2013. 267 pages.

² Tobias Timm, Sie gehören uns allen, Zeit Online, March 2018, Online resource: <https://www.zeit.de/2018/11/dekolonisation-achille-mbembe-philosoph> [last access: 6 April 2019].

ved as a basis for constructing racial subjects in the modern period. Instead of pointing to biological or genetic facts, the author uses the terms Blackness, Black and race as socially constructed and constantly reproduced social categories. As colonialism and racial thinking structured the imaginaries of European societies for centuries, the emergence and establishment of a „dual violence of race and capital“ (p. 37) is not illustrated in traditional ways of chronological analysis and description. Mbembe rather connects different historical periods and events. However, there are three „critical moments“ in history that have been fundamentally shaping the „vertiginous assemble of Blackness and race“, and therefore racial capitalism. The first critical moment is the Atlantic slave trade between the 15th and the 19th century, which is followed by the period of Black liberation and decolonization from the end of the 18th century until the end of apartheid, and finally the early 21st century globalization of markets (pp. 2-3). Mbembe takes the reader on a journey about „a thinking of circulation and crossings“ (p. 8) with several historical events and periods converging in each single chapter. Chapter one, „The Subject of Race“, is emblematic for this „hopping“ and „slipping“ of, between and within different centuries. It deals with Black reason, race and their expressions through history from the plantation economy as an institution to the 21st century. The latter is described as once again being shaped by a global system of surveillance, forms of immobility and a „logic of enclosure“ (pp. 10-37).

Chapter five, „Requiem for the Slave“, which according to Mbembe constitutes the foundation or „ground zero“ of the book (p. 129), takes the figural writings of the Nigerian and Congolese novelists, Amos Tutuola and Sony Labou Tansi, as a starting point to describe the slave trade „[...] as an emblematic manifestation of the nocturnal face of capitalism [...]“ (p. 129). Out of destruction, violence and death, as the author illustrates, can still evolve the possibility of individual and collective healing. Chapter six, „The Clinic of the Subject“, focuses on the different historical events important for this process of healing such as the struggle for decolonization on the African continent. Mbembe con-

textualizes, for instance, the controversial notion of violence as employed by the Algerian psychiatrist Frantz Fanon during the liberation struggle against the French army in Algeria. The „emancipatory violence of the colonized“, he explains, mainly had the function of healing the wounds of colonial atrocities (p. 167). According to Mbembe, the ideas of Fanon still have relevance for the oppressed and subaltern in the world today, though their forms of struggle differ in the digital age. What remains of the thinking of Fanon today, he states, is the idea that no domination can completely „eliminate, contain, or suppress“ the human being (p. 170).

With his complex and profound philosophical analysis of the history of ideas and politics around race, Mbembe's book sets the ground for a deeper analysis of contemporary forms, flows and actors of global capitalism. The emergence of a global economy from the 14th century onwards, as he shows, has effectively been strongly entangled with the exchange of goods and people across continents. The exclusion, degradation and brutalizing effects of the triangular trade, transformed Black people into „living script[s] of capital“ (p. 6), and into the form and spirit of merchandise. In his essay, Mbembe impressively illustrates how these practices were reflected in and legitimized by the thinking of Euro-American intellectuals. What makes Mbembe's account at once complex but fascinating for the reader is, on the one hand, the interconnectedness of events and periods he illustrates. It is, on the other hand, the richness of philosophical and political readings from which the essay retrieves its arguments and empirical evidence. They range from the fictions of novelists as Tutuola, the psychiatric accounts of Fanon, to the Pan-Africanist thinking of Léopold Sédar Senghor, or references to the racist, yet „enlightened“ reasoning of Hegel or Tocqueville.

Yet the meaning of contemporary processes and forms of the „Becoming Black of the world“ remain rather fuzzy, and often lack empirical evidence. It remains open whether the postindustrial subject in times of neoliberalism (broadly defined by Mbembe as the domination of the industries of the Silicon Valley and digital technologies, p. 3) could and should be analyzed according to the historical

racial subject. Mbembe states in the introductory chapter that the systematic risks experienced by Black slaves during early capitalism have today become the norm for a large part of subaltern humanity (p. 4). He also asserts, though, that racial categories and belonging today still play a role in the right to mobility and migration (p. 27). While „imperial practices“ (p. 4) may also have moved to other places in the world, he still alerts us of the potential transformation of Europe into a „fortress“ in response to migration from the Global South (p. 177). An empirical investigation into what the claim that capitalism is setting about „recolonizing its own center“ (p. 179) means, is certainly worth further analysis. However, he concludes the book with a relatively optimistic outlook on the future of humanity. Not only did racial exploitation become part of a global order in the last centuries. The struggles for liberation and decolonization also always had a global dimension. According to Mbembe, the healing forces of these struggles today serve as point of reference for a range of subaltern movements (p. 172). Concerning the future of humanity, he reminds us though that a contemporary struggle for a world beyond race is not possible without a political and ethical critique of racism (p. 28).

Diana Ayeh über Mbembe, Achille: *Critique of Black Reason*. Durham 2017, in: H-Soz-Kult 21.09.2019.