

## WEIGHING LIVES

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**ABSTRACT:** Transcript of Achille Mbembe's conference, entitled Weighing Lives, given on November 5, 2020, at the XIX Journey of the Brazilian Space for Psychoanalytic Studies in Rio de Janeiro. In this essay, the Cameroonian thinker develops his theses presented in *Policies of Enmity and Brutalism* about the policies of the living that the present time requires, especially regarding the right to breathe and the belonging of the Earth to all living things, human and non-human. To what extent the psychoanalytic project, in its terms, contributes to the pluralization of knowledge and its refoundation through the resumption of the All-World archives is one of its questions for psychoanalysis. Finally, it is around the incalculable present in every living thing that Achille Mbembe defends the idea that the living thing is that which has no price and cannot be weighed.

**Keywords:** policies of the living; pluralization of knowledge; right to breathe; sharing of the Earth.

**RESUMO: Pesar as vidas.** Transcrição da conferência de Achille Mbembe, intitulada *Pesar as vidas*, proferida em 5 de novembro de 2020 na XIX Jornada do Espaço Brasileiro de Estudos Psicanalíticos do Rio de Janeiro. Neste ensaio o pensador camaronês desenvolve suas teses apresentadas em *Políticas da inimizade e Brutalismo* sobre as políticas do vivente que o tempo presente exige, sobretudo quanto ao direito à respiração e ao pertencimento da Terra relativamente a todos os viventes, humanos e não humanos. Em que medida o projeto psicanalítico, nos seus termos, contribui para a pluralização dos saberes e a refundação deles pela retomada dos arquivos do Todo-Mundo, é uma de suas interrogações à psicanálise. Finalmente, é em torno do incalculável presente em todo vivente que Achille Mbembe defende a ideia de que o vivente é aquilo que não tem preço, nem se pode pesar.

**Palavras-chave:** políticas do vivente; pluralização dos saberes; direito à respiração; partilha da Terra.

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I wanted to reflect on a topic that has been worrying me for some time and concerns what I call *Weighing Lives*.

Rather than offering a ready-made analysis, I would like to share several observations and comments. These observations and comments are part of a broader investigation, with the main conclusions being presented successively in *Politics of Enmity* (2016) and *Brutalism* (2020).

To begin with, I would like to say a word or two about the time that is ours, today's time, how we need to characterize it, and what makes it the essential mark, or, if we want, the singularity.

Currently, we clearly experience a series of transformations, large and small, a series of multiple transformations. It is not just about political changes such as the departure from democracy, for example, the entry into what is called fascism, but also economic changes, to the extent that today, economics or the economic increasingly tends to identify with neurobiology, as economics is no longer purely and simply a matter of algorithmic or computational reason. Climate and ecological changes I don't need to insist we are all aware of the fact we have now entered the era of the Anthropocene and technological changes to the extent that what we are experiencing is, deep down, a technological escalation, i.e., we have never in the history of humanity achieved such feats in the scientific and technological field and such feats were accomplished at a speed never seen before in the history of our stay on Earth. As our imaginations are also boiling, we sometimes have the impression of high acceleration and sometimes of a great contraction, as if we were trapped in a huge whirlpool of sand.

Let us add that these changes are occurring at an unprecedented speed. One of the main effects of these multiple changes is a kind of *epistemological disorientation* we experience, the impression that there is no longer any foundation on which to build the work of organizing and expressing the intelligible or, if we want, intelligence, as opposed to the passions, emotions, affections. On the other hand, these changes deeply call into question the sum of knowledge inherited from a distant and recent past and cruelly expose its limits. That is, we have the impression of living in a treasure trove of knowledge, let's say, that is no longer relevant.

Hence the need for an unprecedented renewal of our analytical instruments, languages, and discourses and their pluralization. And, if I refer to the demand for decolonization of knowledge, I go even further and talk about pluralization to clearly indicate that it is not about marginalizing some knowledge but about organizing a more dynamic trade between different types of knowledge, a reciprocal decentering of all knowledge and all archives, including psychoanalytic knowledge.

Hence, finally, the conviction that to face the new situations and trials that humanity currently faces, the need to refound knowledge cannot be achieved without resorting to what I call the archives of the *All-World*, a term for Édouard Glissant, where, for a long time, we were content with the archives of just one of the provinces of the Earth, in this case, the so-called European archives.

I spoke a moment ago about the impression we have of a "great acceleration" accompanied by sudden contractions. I would like to return for a moment to what I call the *boiling of imaginaries*. It is one of the consequences of a phenomenon, I would even say an event, to which we do not pay enough attention, namely, the *intertwining of time*. Assuming we can still talk about History with a capital H, it is no longer just the history of human beings. To have any meaning, the time of humans or human societies must now be combined with geological and climatic time, the time of plants and animals, the time of microbes, bacteria, and viruses, the biosphere time, and technosphere time. In short, it is all the forms of living beings that now challenge us and are recognized as co-actors in the past and future of the Earth and all its inhabitants.

This interrogates the project of psychoanalysis in a completely radical way. If it is true that what needs to be located in the clinic, or if we want, what needs to be psychoanalyzed, is, deep down, the unconscious, how are we going to analyze the unconscious of the biosphere, for example? Or the unconscious of plants, the unconscious of animals, the unconscious that carries within itself the technosphere, that surrounds our daily existence? These are the questions posed to the psychoanalytic project, whatever tradition is evoked.

Thus, in relation to such an intertwining of time and complex sedimentation regimes, we are entitled to ask whether the old distinctions between past, present, and future are still useful. The same goes for the usual categories, such as rupture and continuity. The idea of a progression or a linear flow of time has long been called into question.

We can clearly see that the phenomenon of reversal or reversibility is expanding. But what precisely is it that *returns*? Is what returns exactly the same as what previously came? I leave aside the phenomenon of traces, marks, and erasure. Is there really something that can be erased? What about the unerasable that lies dormant under the towel or in the ashes, ready to be reactivated?

It is evident that these phenomena cannot simply be confused with forgetting, remembering, or reminiscence. The concatenation of times leads to inevitable collisions. It is no longer about acceleration and the escape in itself but about time at multiple speeds, *time in migration*, the *transmigration of time*, to return to that term dear to someone like Mircea Eliade. More than ever, this requires a diagnosis, which is both psychoanalytic and political.

But what is most impressive today, especially in the West and its dependencies or immediate neighborhoods, is the rise of theologies of extinction, of the aging of the sun star. This is a world at the height of its technological power but which, more than ever, is dominated by fear of its own end.

Sometimes, this is imagined in terms of widespread radioactivity or rampant toxicity, and sometimes in terms of self-combustion. But that's not all. Added to this is the panic caused by the fear of the "great replacement," the idea

of a bioracial replacement, that of whites (the declining and dying race) threatened by so-called people of color. Let us call this *eugenics in reverse*, caused by the phenomena of declining birth rates on the one hand and apparent under-repopulation on the other.

With the great hopes of radical transformations disappearing, it is as if we returned to the elementary, to the *return of packs*, to raw and instinctive phenomena, starting with the struggle between species and the fight for survival. The idea of a happy ending was removed. Things are likely to end badly. But the desire for mythology persists. Therefore, many cynical fictions and all types of beliefs proliferate against the backdrop of a powerful return to the phenomena of bewitchment, including collective bewitchment.

At the same time, an eschato-apocalyptic thought develops that invites us to contemplate the collapse and prepare for the end. Other currents try to rethink utopia and the future in terms of technological messianism or even possible expatriation to other planets. The redemption of humanity, they argue, will paradoxically involve technological escalation and a new colonial cycle, techno-molecular and extraterrestrial colonialism.

The observations I have just outlined open up a question that we cannot continue to ignore. The question is the following: is it possible today to imagine a new politics of the time, to *repoliticize time*, that is, to learn to inhabit the Earth beyond the desire for the apocalypse and the impulses of nihilism and technolatr? If so, in what terms, with what objective, if not to turn reality inside out and imagine other possibilities?

Won't such a re-inhabitation project require a minimum of reparation for this same Earth, or even the restitution to all its inhabitants, human and non-human, of a kind of fundamental, almost natal right, the right to breathe? And we have to realize that imagining other possibilities in contemporary conditions requires, more than ever, making space for the unpredictable, for uncertainty, for the possibility of an infinite number of becomings, of new chains of relationships. In other words, to reconcile ourselves once and for all with the idea of a future without guarantees or promises.

Let us move on to what is at stake, i.e., the project of abolishing the mystery that represents the living being. And I would say this is the biggest threat facing us. We gave this project several names: neoliberalism, fascism, and so on. Let us say there is no simple way to ask this question, but I think we gain from revisiting a part of the archives of the past, archives of one moment or another in our history on Earth.

What is human nature and, beyond that, the living? What makes us moral subjects? What is our destiny on Earth? For a long time, these questions seemed to concern only theologians, metaphysicians, and philosophers of existence.

Strange as it may seem, today they are back, including and especially among scientists. Furthermore, with the confinement in force due to the coronavirus and the death toll rising, meditation on the end of times has only increased in intensity. But while yesterday it was a question of determining whether the human is, first and foremost, body or spirit, today the debate focuses on the point of knowing whether it is matter and only matter or whether, ultimately, it is just a set of physical and chemical processes. The discussion is also about where living beings end up, what the future holds for life in the age of extremes, and under what conditions life ends.

The body, matter, and the living being are three very distinct concepts. You don't need to be a Christian to understand that there is something more than matter in the organic unity of each human body. Different cultures and times gave different names to this something. But whatever the cultural differences, the truth about the human body is that it resists any reduction. The same applies to what we could call the *body of the world*, or even its *flesh*, according to authors from my tradition such as Frantz Fanon. This body of the world can be recognized by its profusion. Typical of this is the viral uproar we are currently experiencing on a planetary scale.

Many people see this virus as a demonstration of the almost infinite power of nature. For others, it is a cosmic event, a harbinger of future catastrophes. Still, for others, it is the logical result of the project of a world without God, which they accuse modernity of having created. This world supposedly free but in reality self-sufficient and without resources would only have subdued humans under the constraint of a nature now converted into an arbitrary power.

In fact, the absence of God is not the defining characteristic of today's world. Nor is it its virulent and vengeful presence, in the form of the violence of a virus or other natural calamities, which defines our era. The essential mark of the beginning of the 21st century is the transition to animism. Associated with the rise of technology, the transformations of capitalism will have led to a double excess: an excess of *pneuma* (breathing) and an excess of artifacts, the transformation of artifacts into *pneuma*, in the theological sense of this term. Nothing expresses this excess better than the techno-digital universe, which has become the double of our world, the object incarnation of *pneuma*.

Technolatr, the idolatry of technology, the hatred of reason, and the desire for mythology can happily coexist. When, as now, history contracts and mass narcissism spreads, the image almost inevitably becomes the subject's privileged language. It acquires a dimension that is simultaneously ecumenical and sacramental. It takes the place of the eucharistic act, which we know is centered on the divine body and blood offered to be taken, drunk, and eaten in memory of the sacrificed. How can we be surprised by the fact that the relationship between the political, on the one hand, and the impulsive and visceral, on the other, is closely reinforced? In effect, new technological means will lead to the abolition of the unconscious.

Animism, what is it? Contemporary animism? Animism is the name that should be given to the event that is the reappearance of the human as virulence. Contemporary animism is the result of a vast reformulation of the human and

its relationship with living things. Thus began the era of the second creation. It is now a question of technically capturing the energy of living beings and all kinds of inert or animated objects and discharging it into humans in a process that is reminiscent of the first creation itself.

This time, however, the essential materials are no longer limited to clay. They are atoms, organisms, electrons, and all types of particles. Isn't the intention to rearrange all the living being's skills in organic-artificial compounds endowed, for the most part, with the characteristics of both the human person and other beings and things? These compounds are called to act as doubles of humans. And through these compounds, humans are finally called to affirm their essential multiplicity.

This project forces us to return to Earth; Earth is understood no longer as a piece of land that is appropriated and around which enclosures are built according to the logic of sharing, but as an event that, *in fine*, fundamentally challenges any idea of *borderization*.

Understood in this way, the Earth belongs to all its inhabitants, *without distinction of races or species*. It mocks both the blind particular and the naked singularity. It reminds us how each body, human or not, however unique it may be, carries within and within itself, in its essential porosity, the marks not of the diaphanous universal but the traits of the in-common. Consequently, any politics of the living being is based, by definition, on the idea that the living is that which has no price. And because it is priceless, it fundamentally belongs to that which is beyond all measure. As such, it cannot be counted or weighed. It simply has to do with the *incalculable*.

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