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Topic 3: Racial Necropolitics of Immobility
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Existing on the border

We studied the idea of “Necropolitics” from Achille Mbembe’s work and we’ve seen how it is an extreme form of disciplinary power, related to the management of people’s own death. In this short essay I would try to relating these reflections, the readings of the course, with an anti-state perspective, or, if you prefer, with an anarchist way of thinking.

Mbembe, in his eponymous work *Necropolitics*, after having summarized the philosophical perspective about life and death and having criticized the Foucaultian term, “Biopower”, a power that disciplines peoples managing their bodies and their biological functions, came to the conclusion that the subject is truly free to live his own life just if he has full agency about his own death. In his reflection that case is avoided by the power, the “Necropower”, that is taking control over the death of individuals in various ways: from a “classical” method, like the wars, but also creating categories of “living-deads”, people, like migrants for example, that have no agency about their life nor their death.

The case study considered by us revolve all about the border as a privileged place where the “living-dead” find full expression, in concrete terms. The border, using the Agamben’s reflection, is the visible dispositive that makes people *homini sacri*, i.e. individual who had lost their political meaning and dimension and that keep on living just as bare or naked life: just a biological being. That is true because the socio-political meaning and dimension is given to an individual just by his belonging to a community determined in nation-state way, even if it is unrecognised by the international community.

A migrant it’s like a ghost. He isn’t just a foreigner, in that case he will still exist in terms of political discourse, even in negative or bad ways. The migrant, crossing multiple borders in an illegal way, is playing outside of that game. He is Nessuno, like Odysseus presented himself to Polyphemus, just bare biological life. But, in order to understand that, it isn’t strictly necessary thinking about exotic stories of migration, desert crossing or other like that, because we have the everyday examples in our occidental life. Just think about the times you have to confirm your existence as a citizen of a peculiar state: in order to apply to university, to have a debit card, to buy cigarettes, to answer to policemen’s stop, to go to the hospital, you even need a badge to enter some of university toilet; I don’t even tell about the informatic implications (to have a regular and complete google account you need a valid ID). So, just like a lot of scholars and writers think, the idea of a globalized world annihilating the role of the nation-state is just misleading. The nation-state is more strong and concrete in our lives than ever, just in new ways. There is no more a king or a supreme authority based on a single person that judges and puts to death, but the ideological and cultural structure it’s the same: we keep thinking about being italians, spanish, british, etc. The word “democracy” is misleading too, for many reason. First indirect democracy, from a political perspective, doesn’t mean that all participate in decision, but that the majority does and if we think about big numbers even a 30/40% of people on the losing side of the election it’s a big numbers of individual that will undergo a decision that they didn’t like. Second the rhetoric discourses of democracy is closely linked to a, even unexplicit, eurocentric views: the US’ politics of the last 100 years shows how considering ourself the illuminated minority bringing values of freedom to the rest of the world, in most of the case that doesn’t want that, is dangerous and evolves into long and violent wars, where the cost is paid by innocents.

So in this reflection, following Graeber’s one, of a globalization still based on the entity of the nation-state that uses the misleading words “democracy and pluralism” to relate with other cultures, I will add the cases presented in the course.

For example the Khosravi's work, *The illegal traveller*, underlines very well the capitalistic, racist, and nation-state related causes of what Agamben calls "*homo sacer*". Khosravi tells about the naturalized view that people have of nation separated by borders, forgetting that these are arbitrary and recent sociopolitical constructs, always related to an Other killed, racialised or robbed; just as Mbembe said, the concept of nation is always forged in contrast to an Other.

Now we are able to see how it is a vicious circle: the nation-state, based on capitalistic exploitation and racialisation, creates borders, that, even in cultural terms, not just in bureaucratic ones, make you unable to live outside of that "game", disposing of your life, from the birth to the death: indeed even Unabomber got a citizenship and a name for the state in which he was born.

But that isn't all. The power of the state doesn't end at his borders, it's pervasive, following you always and everywhere, even after death. About that 2 strong examples are offered by De Leon's work, *The land of open graves*, and Kovras' one, *Death as the border*. The first let us understand how there is a precise plan behind migration flows, and the migrant's deaths are not accidental. He brings us the example of the PTD, "Prevention through Deterrence", the plan set in 1993 by the USA federal government to manage the immigration flow from Mexico. It consisted in guarding massively the border between the city of El Paso (USA) and Ciudad Juarez (Mexico), making for migrants easier the border trespassing in the desert area, outside the city. But a trip in the Mexican desert is very dangerous and the probabilities to die crossing the border, i.e. the desert, are very high. So these deaths should be seen as caused by USA government, but they are reported as "accidental". This is a clearly example of Necropower: the USA state is disposing of mexicans life deciding about their death with a rational and precise plan. In the second ethnography Kovras tells us about what happens to migrant's bodies after their death on the border, in this case the sea border of Greek islands. These bodies are in a situation similar to the one of the "living-deads", even if they are dead for real. That because they don't exist neither for their origin state nor for the Greek one, in bureaucratic terms, and as we saw before, the bureaucratic dimension is the only one that matters for the nation-state logic. Not existing for the state means that none will bury you, none will mourn you in official way, and even the mourning for your family is made difficult, since no official death certificate will be sent to your relatives that will live forever in an emotive "borderland", not knowing your destiny, neither in positive nor in negative ending, and we know very well how the dimension of unknown is the scariest one.

So, if we think that the nation-state logic is pervasive, and even goes over death, we are obliged to look at these phenomena and plans as political ones. As Agamben first, and then Mbembe, said the law is so pervasive that even being outside the norm, as the *hominis sacer*, or as the "state of exception" (temporary suspension of the law for some individuals in the same space with other for whom the law is still working), is a part of the law itself. Just like the light doesn't exist without the darkness, the law is ontologically founded on the existing of "state of exception".

By the way this isn't the point where I want to land. My point is that all that kind of phenomena can, and must, exist just in the nation-state game. The problem is that, as we discussed, if from that logic it's possible to escape, it's very very hard in pragmatical terms. The only one example that offers a possible escape from that is offered by Mbembe reflection on martyrdom. The martyr for Mbembe is someone who is taking control of his life subtracting his death from the manage of the dominant power, choosing to kill himself together with his oppressors. He regains control of his body, turning it into an weapon, and makes his own death an act of transgression. He is convalidating the Mbembe assumption that your life is truly free if you can dispose completely of your own death. Telling that, I'm not saying that the suicide bomber is neither the better nor the only way of existing outside of the state and of attacking this type of power, but I mentioned it cause it's a good example for some reason. First it's a way, tragically, that has always been chosen and that keeps existing in our contemporaneity. The second reason is that it is depicted, often in a racialised way (all suicide bombers are arabs and all arabs are suicide bombers) by the main discourses of power, using the media, as the most regrettable act that a citizen can do, but it isn't like that if we look at it in rational and unemotive terms, the one that the nation-state logic pretends to assume when it exploits, disrupts, sends to jail poor people, criminalizes, and denies border access to migrants, causing them to die in

the desert. Just to take an example from our discours, the USA's PTD made more deaths in number than every suicide bomber. That is the proof that for the nation-state logic not all the deaths are the same and not all the violence is regrettable, but exists a violence that needs to be considered accetable, sometimes necessary. The disposal of this "acceptable and un-personified violence" is the main weapon of the Necropower.