

## BOOK REVIEW

**ACHILLE MBEMBE, *OUT OF THE DARK NIGHT.*  
ESSAYS ON DECOLONIZATION, NEW YORK: COLUMBIA  
UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2021, 254 P.**

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Famous, appreciated and read on all continents, Achille Mbembe is one of the principal pillar of postcolonial studies, constantly providing content and guidance for social scientists and critical theorists. Eleven years after the launch of *Sortir de la grande nuit*<sup>1</sup>, the intensely updated English version of the masterpiece appears in 2021 at Columbia University Press publishing house. The book's title suggests the progress of the African community on a global scale. Moreover, the Cameroonian author clearly indicates that this project has dealt with "decolonization as a praxis of self-defense and as an experience of emergence and uprising" and it is "an inquiry into the decolonized community".<sup>2</sup>

*Out of the Dark Night* is divided into six dense chapters, outlined by an *Introduction* and an *Epilogue* meant to lead us directly into the *Politics of the Future World*, the main point being the localization of the postcolonial at the present moment, because "our era is far from being one of repentance, and is rather an era of clear conscience" (p. 133) and all chapters are completing and supporting this statement. In his new book, Achille

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<sup>1</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Sortir de la grande nuit*, Paris : Éditions La Découverte, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Out of the dark night. Essays on decolonization*, New York: Columbia University Press: 2021, p. 219. From now on, page in parentheses (p. ...).

Mbembe identifies two dominant modes of argumentation in the study of Africa: descriptivism and the tradition of detailed ethnography and historiography later explaining why they need to be crushed. The first is a way of defining and reading African life forms that is simply based on a series of anecdotes and negative statements, or that simply turns to statistical indices to measure the gap between what is Africa and what we are told it should be. This way of reading always ends up constructing Africa as a pathological case, as a figure of lack. The second is a tradition of detailed, living, and richly textured ethnography and historiography of life forms. Deeply rooted in a tradition of regional studies, dense ethnography, interpretive history, and symbolic analysis have become powerful examples of how we should think and write about human action, as well as analytical strategies that we should deploy to describe and interpret specific forms of social life in particular contexts (p. 33).

Chapter I – *Planetary entanglement* – starts with Hegel’s verdict written in 1830-1831 and continues with the chronological summary of western perception on the black continent but also the change of episteme with the advance of China in Africa, in 2021 we can refer to Africa as a specifically Chinese question. Achille links his arguments to those of the Comaroff brothers presented in *Theory from the South*<sup>3</sup>. It is the global South that affords privileged insight into the workings of the world at large. From the very first pages, in a futuristic note, the Cameroonian intellectual notes that the perception of the new world on the theory has changed, arguing that it was dominated by the melancholy of the fact that there is no supreme universal truth (p. 20). A decisive factor in this direction was the partial degradation of the Christian world, presented itself as a religion of truth (p. 138).

*Disenclosure*, or simply chapter II, and *Proximity without reciprocity*, respectively chapter III, highlights the transition process of the concept decolonization, this process having a slightly negative nuance, because it is closely connected with the directions of the world (like technologically infusion for instance). “Nor should we be surprised that the principal stake of decolonial thought was the disenclosure of the world” (p. 68). Specifically, the philosophical aim of decolonization and of the anticolonial movement that made it possible can be summed up in one phrase: the

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<sup>3</sup> Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *Theory from the South*, New York: Routledge, 2016.

*disenclosure of the world* [*la décloison du monde*]. Moreover, Mbembe insists on the global collective idea the project of decolonization can have appeal only if “it refers to a set of continuous topological folds of the whole” (p. 96) The chapter entitled *Disenclosure* is the most complex as the reader goes through all that decolonization means for Frantz Fanon<sup>4</sup>, in order to arrive to what disenclosure means for Jean-Luc Nancy<sup>5</sup>.

Chapter IV – *The long French imperial winter* – continues the shaping ideas launched in the previous chapters but with a particular focus on French universalism. According to Mbembe, France has long remained at the margins of these new, planetary voyages of thought (p. 99) because until recently, postcolonial thought has been little known in France.

Through the V<sup>th</sup> chapter – *The house without keys* – the author brings into discussion the images, elements, art objects, black bodies and their impact on the white world, and how the white world wasn't prepared to receive and integrate them.

That Africa did not invent thermobaric bombs does not mean that it created neither technical objects nor works of art, or that it was closed to borrowings or to innovation. It privileged other modes of existence, within which technology in the strict sense constituted neither a force of rupture and diffraction, nor a force of divergence and separation, but rather a force of splitting and multiplication. At the heart of this dynamic, each concrete and distinct reality was always and by definition a symbol of something else, of another figure and structure. (p. 149)

Indirectly, it is indicated that African objects and art have shown Europe that it is no longer the center of the world. Obviously, the issue of their return and what they mean for the European consciousness is also evoked.

Chapter VI – *Afropolitanism* – addresses a wider range of sensitive topics, including war, private actors and resources. Mbembe insists on the idea that we don't have enough consistent, real material for the topic of decolonization. Also, he explains that whether it is a matter of literature, philosophy, music, or the arts in general, for almost a century African

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<sup>4</sup> Franz Fanon, *Ecrits sur l'aliénation et la liberté*, Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2008.

discourse has been dominated by three political-intellectual paradigms, which are not mutually exclusive: (1) variants of anticolonial nationalism (lasting influence on the spheres of culture, politics, economics, and religion), (2) various rereadings of Marxism, (figures of “African socialism”) and a (3) Pan-African movement, which has given a special place to two types of solidarity: a racial and transnational solidarity, and an internationalist, anti-imperialist solidarity (p. 194).

Each chapter has as its main element Europe and criticism of it and foremost, how can she contribute at the disenclousure of the world. For instance, “Europe is undoubtedly not a dying world. But, weary, it now represents the world of declining life and crimson sunsets. Here, the spirit has faded, eaten away by extreme forms of pessimism, nihilism, and frivolity” (p. 215).

Finally, with an urge to overcome the practice of textualism, ideology, and activist or “compassionate” denunciation, the author recommends that we need to “make the distinction between what is true and what is held to be true” (p.115). From this book we learn that decolonization is a fluctuating and interdependent process much more complex than what has been plotted so far. No idea is placed at random, everything is embedded in history and in the “criticism” existing until this present moment. Along with the launch of this book, Mbembe is launching a deep challenge: to understand the direction of the new world that is taking shape in front of our eyes: when we leave the book, we’re required to be able to perceive the dimensions of the new world and learn how to deal with it from a theoretical perspective.

## Bibliography

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4. Mbembe, Achille (2021), *Out of the dark night, Essays on Decolonization*, New York: Columbia University Press.
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