



Achille Mbembe

What is postcolonial thinking?

An interview with Achille Mbembe

The faults in Europe's universalism, especially when confronting its colonial history, have nurtured a variety of critical perspectives in the West. Talking to French magazine *Esprit*, theorist Achille Mbembe says that postcolonial thinking looks so original because it developed in a transnational, eclectic vein from the very start. This enabled it to combine the anti-imperialist tradition with the fledgling subaltern studies and a specific take on globalization, he says.

Esprit: "Postcolonial theory" is present in Africa, India, Great Britain, Australia and the United States, but hardly at all in France. Can you tell us what it is all about and what lies behind it? How, in particular, does it differ from anti-western and third-world currents of thought?

Achille Mbembe: What's known in the English-speaking world as "postcolonial studies" and "postcolonial theory" is characterised by its heterogeneity, so what constitutes its originality cannot be summed up easily in a few words.



Foto: François à L'Imprevu

Perhaps I'd better start by making clear that it has little to do with the caricature of "third-worldism" projected by the chorus of penitents in France. In truth, it's a way of thinking that derives from a number of sources and that is far from constituting a system because it is in large part being constructed as it moves forward. That's why it would in my opinion be an exaggeration to call it a "theory". It derives both from anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles on the one hand, and from the heritage of Western philosophy and of the disciplines that constitute the European humanities on the other. It's a fragmented way of thinking, which is both a strength and a weakness. In spite of its fragmented nature there are some forms of reasoning, and some arguments, which distinguish this current of thought and which have made a major contribution to alternative ways of reading our modernity.

To begin with I'd draw your attention to the critique, not of the *West per se*, but of the effects of cruelty and blindness produced by a certain conception — I'd call it colonial — of reason, of humanism, and of universalism. This critique is different from that once made by the existentialist, phenomenological and post-structuralist movements in post-war France. Of course, it is chiefly concerned with the issue of self-creation and self-government. But its approach is not wholly confined to the problem of the "death of God" à la Nietzsche. It differs in many respects from the Sartrean idea of "man without God" taking the place vacated by the "dead God", and hardly subscribes either

to Foucault's notion that "God being dead, man is dead too".

On the other hand, it does put its finger on two things. Firstly, it exposes both the violence inherent in a particular concept of reason, and the gulf separating European moral philosophy from its practical, political and symbolic outcomes. How indeed can the much-trumpeted faith in man be reconciled with the way in which colonized people's life, labour and world of signifiers got sacrificed so unthinkingly? That is the question Aimé Césaire poses in his *Discourse on Colonialism*, for example.

Secondly, postcolonial thinking stresses humanity-in-the-making, the humanity that will emerge once the colonial figures of the inhuman and of racial difference have been swept away. This hope in the advent of a universal brotherly community is very close to Jewish thought — as projected by Ernst Bloch at least, or even Walter Benjamin — minus the politico-theological dimension.

That said, the postcolonial critique operates on several levels. On the one hand, like Edward Said in *Orientalism*, it deconstructs colonial prose: that is to say the mental set-up, the symbolic forms and representations underpinning the imperial project. It also unmasks the potential of this prose for falsification — in a word, the stock of falsehoods and the weight of fantasizing functions without which colonialism as a historical power-system could not have worked. In this way it reveals how what passed for European humanism manifested itself in the colonies as duplicity, double-talk and a travesty of reality.

Indeed, colonization never ceased telling lies about itself and others. As Frantz Fanon explains so clearly in *Black Skin, White Masks*, the procedures for racializing the colonized were the driving force behind this economy of duplicity and falsehood. In postcolonial thinking, race is the wild region, the beast, of European humanism. To borrow Castoriadis's terms on racism, I'd say that the beast puts it more or less this way: "I alone possess value. But I can only be of value, as myself, if others, as themselves, are without value".

Postcolonial thinking aims to take the beast's skeleton apart, to flush out its favourite places of habitation. More radically, it seeks to know what it is to live under the beast's regime, what kind of life it offers, and what sort of death people die from. It shows that there is, in European colonial humanism, something that has to be called unconscious self-hatred. Racism in general, and colonial racism in particular, represents the transference of this self-hatred to the Other.

There is a second level in the postcolonial critique of European humanism and universalism which, if the term had not given rise to so many misunderstandings, could be called biopolitical. The face of Europe which was experienced by the colony (and before that, under slavery, by the "plantation"), and which gradually became familiar, was far from being that of liberty, equality and fraternity. The totem which colonized peoples discovered behind the mask of humanism and universalism was not only deaf and blind most of the time, it was also, above all, characterized by the desire for its own death, but insofar as this death was necessarily conveyed through that of others, it was a delegated death.

It was also a place where law had nothing to do with justice but, on the contrary, was a way of starting wars, continuing them and perpetuating them;

and above all a place where wealth was but a means of exercising over others the right of life and death. As a result it could be said of postcolonial thinking that it is not a critique of power as usually understood, but of force — a force that is incapable of transformation. Once again it is Fanon who has analyzed, better than anyone else, this kind of necropolitical force which, in passing through fiction, becomes sick of life or else, in an act of permanent reversion, takes death for life and life for death. That's why the colonial relationship fluctuates constantly between the desire to exploit the other (seen as racially inferior) and the temptation to eliminate him, to exterminate him.

What — thirdly — characterises postcolonial thinking is entanglement and concatenation, unveiled chiefly through its critique of identity and subjectivity. From this viewpoint it is opposed to a particular Western illusion, that there can be no subject other than in the circular, permanent referral to oneself, to an essential and inexhaustible singularity. In countering this, postcolonial thinking stresses the fact that identity arises from multiplicity and dispersion, that self-referral is only possible in the in-between, in the gap between mark and demark, in co-constitution. In this situation colonisation no longer appears as mechanical and unilateral domination forcing the subjugated into silence and inaction. Quite the reverse — the colonized person is a living, talking, conscious, active individual whose identity arises from a three-pronged movement of violation, erasure and self-rewriting.

Moreover, as Ghandi himself suggested, the universalization of imperialism cannot be explained by the violence of coercion alone: it was a consequence too of the fact that many colonized people agreed, for more or less valid reasons, to become consciously complicit in a fable which they found attractive in a number of respects. The identity of the colonized and of the colonizer was shaped by the intersection between ellipsis, disengagement and renewal. Postcolonial thinking endeavours to analyse this vast area of ambivalence and the aesthetic reasons behind the confusion and its paradoxical effects.

This is perhaps the moment to point out that postcolonial thinking, the critique of European humanism and universalism, is not an end in itself. It is carried out with the aim of paving the way for an enquiry into the possibility of a politics of the fellow-creature. The prerequisite for such a politics is the recognition of the Other and of his or her difference. I believe that this enrolment in the future, in the interminable quest for new horizons for man through the recognition of the Other as fundamentally human is an aspect of this thinking that is all too often forgotten. It is a constituent part of Fanon's quest, of Senghor's in the *Poetical Works* during his imprisonment in a German camp (Front Stalag 230), of Edward Said's meditations at the end of his life or, more recently, of Paul Gilroy's considerations about the possibility of convivial life in a henceforth multicultural world (*Postcolonial Melancholia*). The same note is struck in much Afro-American thought, confronted as it is with the difficulty of reappropriating the heritage of slavery and racism, with organising them in the service of the resistance of the dominated without however falling into the trap of racialization and race glorification.

One last point. What constitutes the political strength of postcolonial thought is its enrolment in the historic social struggles of colonized societies and especially its rereading of the theoretical praxis of what we call liberation movements. So it is a way of thinking which, in several respects, still believes in the postulate that the only true learning is the leaning that aims to transform the world. It is a way of thinking that belongs to the being-subject, to the

being–for–itself, to the manner in which the dialectic of master and slave, of colonist and native, might be transcended. Finally, if postcolonial thought today is the preserve of British and American academic institutions and of English–speaking intellectuals, it should not be forgotten that this current was largely inspired by French thinking. I've mentioned Fanon, Césaire and Senghor; I could have added Glissant and others too. Today, certain works of African francophone literature have taken their place among the canonical texts of postcolonial criticism.

But added to this is the influence of French thinkers of Otherness like Merleau–Ponty, Sartre, Levinas and many more besides; also the contribution made to postcolonial thinking by the analyses of Foucault, Derrida, and even Lacan. It's therefore a way of thinking that in several respects is very close to a peculiarly French approach to reasoning, so it's rather paradoxical that, because of its cultural insularity and the narcissism of its elites, France has cut itself off from these new ventures in world thought.

Unfortunately it looks as though absolutely nothing can be salvaged from the post–war French critical tradition, in spite of the well–known fact that it placed centre–stage not only the phenomenon of Nazism, but of colonialism too. It's as if the colonial event belonged to another age and another place, and as if it had absolutely nothing to teach us about how to understand our own modernity, about citizenship, about democracy, even about the development of our humanities. As a result France finds it difficult not to speak solely about itself: contemporary French thought is no longer capable of speaking about the Other, even less to the Other; it prefers, in the good old colonial tradition, to speak in the place of the Other with — we know — catastrophic results, as during the urban riots recently, and on the occasion of the surreal debate about the benefits of colonization.

A way out of third–worldism

Esprit: Can a link be established between globalization and postcolonial thought?

AM: It can be said that postcolonial thought is in many respects a globalized way of thinking, even if initially it does not use that term. In the first place, it shows that there is little disjunction between the history of the nation and that of the empire. The Napoleon of the restitution of slavery and the Toussaint Louverture who represented the revolution of human rights are dual aspects of the same nation and the same colonial empire. Postcolonial thought demonstrates that colonialism itself was a global experience which contributed to the universalization of representations, techniques and institutions (in the case of the nation state, even of merchandise of the modern kind). It shows that this process of universalization, far from being a one–way street, was basically a paradox, fraught with all sorts of ambiguities.

Moreover, where the Atlantic is concerned, the "colony" was added to another power–formation, the "plantation", a key unit of an earlier age which could be called the age of proto–globalization. The postcolonial critique shows that our global modernity needs to be viewed in context well before the nineteenth century, starting with the period when the merchandization of private property was conducted hand–in–hand during the slave trade with that of people. The age of the Atlantic slave trade is also the age of the great migrations, even if they were carried out under duress. It was the age of the forced intermixture of populations, of the creative fission in the course of which there arose the creole

world of the great contemporary urban cultures.

It was also the age of the great planetary experiments. As Paul Gilroy shows in *The Black Atlantic*, and as do historians like Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker (*The Many-Headed Hydra: Slaves, Sailors, Commoners and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*), it was the moment when people, torn from the land, blood and soil, learned to imagine communities that transcended the bonds of land, blood and soil, forsook the comfort of repetition and invented new forms of mobilisation and transnational solidarities. Before colonies became the great laboratories of modernity in the nineteenth century, the "plantation" prefigured already a new consciousness of the world and of culture.

Alongside these historical factors there exist other levels of connection of a theoretical nature. This is particularly the case where a dialogue starts to take shape between postcolonial thought and Afro-modern thought, in the United States and the Caribbean especially. This Afro-modern thought is one of interconnections and of the in-between. It maintains that an appeal to the world can only truly be made where, by force of circumstance, one has been alongside others, with others. Under these conditions "returning to oneself" is above all "leaving oneself", leaving the night of identity and the lacunae of my little world. So here we have a way of reading globalization that rests on the radical affirmation of the density of proximity, of displacement, even of dislocation. In other words, consciousness of the world arises from the actualization of what was already possible in me, achieved through my encounter with the lives of others, my responsibility towards the lives of others and towards seemingly distant worlds and, above all, towards people with whom I have apparently no connection: the intruders.

Esprit: To what extent can the development of this current of thought be explained by the historical and political situation? It's doubtless no accident that the current emerged after the failure of postcolonial nation-states. Isn't the problem today the reconstruction of politics?

AM: This question requires a lengthy answer. It can be said that there were three cardinal moments in the development of postcolonial thought. Anti-colonial struggles were its starting point. These struggles were preceded and accompanied by extended reflection upon themselves by the colonized — a reflection on the contradictions arising from their dual status as "natives" and imperial "subjects"; an examination of the forces that enabled them to resist colonial domination; debates on the relationship between "class" factors and "racial" factors. The discourse then centred on what may be called the politics of autonomy, that is, to adopt Vincent Descombes's terms, the ability to "say I", to "act independently", to acquire citizen status and, thereby, to participate in the universal. In the French-speaking African and black diaspora tradition, Césaire, Fanon, Senghor and many others, including novelists and people of action (trade unionists and political leaders), have written the canonical texts of this period.

Next comes the second moment, which I would situate around the 1980s. It is the moment of "high theory", and its high point was the publication by Edward Said of his major work, *Orientalism* — a work he extended and clarified a few years later in *The World, the Text and the Critic* and in *Culture and Imperialism*. It was Edward Said, a stateless Palestinian, who laid the first foundations for what was gradually to become "postcolonial theory", in the sense this time of an alternative form of knowledge about modernity and a

separate academic discipline. One of Said's decisive contributions was to show, in opposition to the Marxist doxa of the period, that the colonial project was not reducible to a simple military–economic system, but was underpinned by a discursive infrastructure, a symbolic economy, a whole apparatus of knowledge the violence of which was as much epistemic as it was physical. The cultural analysis of the discursive infrastructure and of the colonial imagination would gradually become the very subject of postcolonial theory and give rise to severe criticism from intellectuals in the Marxist and internationalist tradition like Aijaz Ahmed (*In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*), Chandra Talpade Mohanty (*Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*), and Benita Parry.

In the Indian context, three other thinkers would help widen the breach opened up by Said. First up was Ashis Nandy, who in *The Intimate Enemy* advanced the proposition that colonialism was, above all, a psychological affair; that, as such, the struggle against colonialism was both a material and mental war, and that in any case the resistance to colonialism, and the nationalism that was its corollary, were forced to operate in the terms defined beforehand by the West. It was Nandy who, well before the rest, facilitated Fanon's passage into India. At the same time he introduced psychoanalysis into postcolonial discourse while at the same time opening up a dialogue between that current of thought and Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*. Then there was Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, an Indian academic and translator of Jacques Derrida's *De la grammatologie*, and author of a famous text that has since become a classic (*Can the Subaltern Speak?*) and of a summa entitled *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. Finally there was Homi Bhabha, editor of the symposium *Nation and Narration* and author of *The Location of Culture* and of a commentary on Fanon.

It was during the 1980s, too, that a start was made on forging links between postcolonial thought and several other currents of distinctive pedigree. Suffice it to mention two, the merit of which was to offer a historiographical foundation to what, up till then, had chiefly consisted of the analysis of literary texts. First of all, subaltern studies, a current of historical thought that arose in India, developed a critique of nationalist and anti–colonial historiography while at the same time trying to recover the historical voices and capabilities of decolonization's rejects (peasants, women, the untouchable caste, the underprivileged, inferiors) through a revision and selective rereading of Marxism (see in particular Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*). Because of the pride of place accorded to the "voiceless" and the "powerless", a good part of the initial theoretical inspiration of the subaltern–studies school derives from Gramsci. But the "translation" of Marx into non–European languages and contexts was aimed above all at understanding why, in India, the anti–colonial struggle led not to a radical transformation of society but to a sort of "passive revolution" characterized by the return of "communalism", that is, in the last resort, to an anti–nationalist scenario.

On the other hand there is a whole Afro–modern current of thought which developed around the shores of the Atlantic and which took this oceanic and transnational formation as its basic unit of analysis (notably Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic*). Its proponents are Afro–American, Black–British and Afro–Caribbean intellectuals, and its central concern is the rewriting of the multiple histories of modernity at the meeting point between racial factors and factors of social class. In that perspective, this Afro–modern current is just as much interested in the question of diasporas as in the procedures by which individuals are subjugated to ignominious categories blocking all access to the

status of subject in history. Such is the case particularly with confinement in a race.

From this viewpoint W.E.B. Dubois, author of *The Soul of Black Folks*, is the Afro-American thinker who has offered the best analysis of the effects of the "sombre veil of colour" in which people of African origin have been confined in the New World. He highlights the fact that such a "veil" not only covers the individual forced to wear it, but makes him or her unrecognizable and incomprehensible, prey to a "double consciousness".

This current of thought is also alert to the themes of the "liberation of minds" and of memory in conditions of captivity (religion, music and the performing arts in particular) and to the issue of dispersion (diasporas), as well as to what Glissant calls the "poetics of connection". Artistic and aesthetic experience occupies a central place in this current. In discussing slave songs, "old, mysterious songs through which the soul of the black slave spoke to people", Dubois says that "those who walked in darkness, in olden times, sang songs of grief — because their hearts were weary". Paul Gilroy, too, takes up the theme of black music, in his analysis of jazz and reggae.

As can be seen, the postcolonial current is an intellectual constellation the strength and the weakness of which have their origins in its very fragmentation. Being the product of the circulation of knowledge between different continents and across different anti-imperial traditions, it is like a river with multiple tributaries. What gives it its strength in English-speaking universities is not only the radicality of its eclecticism; it is above all because it has managed to decentre the question of the humanities. Thanks to its anti-systematic syncretism, its creative syntheses, its recourse to hybrid methods, its insistence on cultural and epistemological pluralism, even its generally intelligent and fertile misreadings, it has made possible the installation of other questions and other forms of knowledge at the very heart of the academy.

The third moment is marked by the central phenomenon of our epoch, globalization, that is the generalized expansion of trade and its grip on the totality of natural resources, of human production, in a word of living in its entirety. It seems to me that in these circumstances the literary text alone can no longer be the sole archive of choice. But critical reflection on contemporary forms of life-instrumentalization can gain in radicality if it accepts that slavery and colonization — capitalism's old and recent formations — need to be taken seriously. It's clear, indeed, how constant was the refusal, in the way colonial capitalism functioned, to institute the sphere of the living as a limit to economic appropriation. As for slavery, it was a mode of production, circulation and distribution of wealth grounded in the refusal of institutionalization in any domain whatever of the "non-appropriable". From every point of view, the "plantation", the "factory" and the "colony" were the principal laboratories in which experiments were conducted into the authoritarian destiny of the world that we see today.

Reinvention of the subject

Esprit: Is the postcolonial era both the hope of an exit from an inhuman world — with consequences in terms of religion — and a time of necessary reinvention?

AM: To my mind it's the era both of the end and of reinvention, starting with the reinvention of what has suffered the most damage, the body. But it's also a time of fresh struggles. In the context of extreme poverty, of extreme racialization and of the omnipresence of death, the body is the first to be affected, the first to be hurt. Fanon had already drawn attention to this at the end of his first book *Black Skin, White Masks*, where he turns to his body and utters this prayer: "Oh my body, make of me a man who asks questions".

As is clearly shown by the example of South Africa on its emergence from apartheid, nothing can be reinvented unless one is capable both of glancing backward and of looking forward, because if what began in blood ends in blood the chances of a new beginning are lessened by the haunting presence of the horrors of the past. Put another way, it is difficult to reinvent anything if one simply repeats against others the violence once inflicted on oneself. There is no "good violence" that can follow on automatically from "bad violence" and be legitimized by it. All violence, "good" or "bad", always sanctions a disjunction. The reinvention of politics in postcolonial conditions first requires people to depart from the logic of vengeance, above all when vengeance wears the shabby garb of the law.

That said, the struggle to escape from an inhuman order of things cannot do without what may be called the poetic productivity of the sacred. After all, what would Africa be without the sacred? Here the sacred represents the imaginative resource *par excellence*. The sacred is to be understood not only in relation to the divine, but also as the "power of therapy" and of hope in a historical context in which violence has touched not only material infrastructures but psychological infrastructures too, through the denigration of the Other, through the assertion of the latter's worthlessness.

It's this discourse — sometimes interiorized — about worthlessness that is challenged by certain forms of the sacred, the ultimate aim being to enable those who were on their knees to "arise and walk" at last. In these circumstances, the philosophical, political and ethical question is how to give support to this "ascent in humanity" — an ascent at the end of which person-to-person dialogue becomes possible and replaces commands delivered to the object.

Esprit: When you speak of this ability to be oneself, to say "I", to "arise and walk", are you thinking in terms of individuals, or of peoples and collective entities?

AM: Both. I'm referring to the task of learning again to envisage oneself as a universal source of meaning. Harm has been done to individuals quite as much as to communities. Liberation struggles always bring centre-stage people who emerge from a community and who are expert at scrutinizing the hour, keeping a weather-eye open, and shouldering on the community's behalf the question "When?". They are people who probe the night sky for a glimpse of the dawn and who lead the community towards the light. This was what Martin Luther King did, and Nelson Mandela, and Mahatma Gandhi — heroes for whom revolutionary asceticism began with the drive for self-transformation.

South Africa shows clearly that the injunction to "arise and walk" is addressed to all, to the oppressed of yesteryear and to their enemies. It is pseudo-liberationist to believe that it is enough to kill the colonist and take his place for relationships of reciprocity to be restored. South Africa enables us to see what it is in the politics of revenge that merely reproduces the Cain

complex. What could lie beyond destruction and resentment can only be imagined in a painful confrontation with the questions, "What is to be done with the enemy? Who is my neighbour? And how can we answer in a responsible fashion for both?" That said, the desire for reconciliation alone cannot easily take the place of the radical demand for justice. In order to enable those who were on their knees not long before, bowed down under the weight of oppression, to arise and walk, justice must be done. So there is no escape from the need for justice.

Esprit: What do you think of the experience of the "Truth and Reconciliation" commission in South Africa?

AM: It was the path that had to be followed. I'm not saying that everything has been achieved. But people, blacks and whites, had to be wrenched from the jaws of the dog-mentality, the pig-mentality and the rabble-mentality that is so characteristic of racism in general. The cornerstone of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was the notion of deliverance from self-hatred and from hatred of the Other. Indeed, what centuries of racism had done was to lead everyone to the narrow gate of the sepulchre. Having lived beside the sepulchre, people had to be brought back to life.

What the South African experience teaches us is that to make a fetish of the fact of having been a victim in world history often makes the person who has been prey to such a misfortune wish to shed blood, any blood; unfortunately, all too frequently, never that of the torturers but almost always someone else's, no matter whose. Because, in order to be able to function, the fetish requires endless sacrifices and thus fresh victims killed to appease the sacrificer-god. Central to the victimary economy is the desire for expiation: it takes the form of the spirit of vengeance – an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth — in line with the ancient monotheistic religions. Indeed, insofar as the transcendent is never grounded in one's own death, it has to be through the sacrificial killing of someone else that the sacred is established.

That was what South Africa sought, through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, to avoid, and what distinguishes the South African experience from that of a country like Israel. Indeed, those states which define themselves mainly as victimary subjects often appear too as subjects filled with hate, that is subjects that can never stop miming death by sacrifice and inflicting on others all the acts of cruelty of which they were once themselves the expiatory victims.

Esprit: On the question of victims' memory, is there a specifically black dimension, of blacks and their history, different from that of the experience in India, for example? Or are these specificities transcended by reflection on these issues?

AM: First, a general answer. It doesn't seem to me that people in South Africa believe in a primary, endless mourning compared to which all other grief is merely pagan. People don't think, either, that in order for one's own suffering to be acknowledged it's necessary to deny the suffering of others and empty it of all human meaning. The issue of memory in South Africa is not about which human suffering should be sanctified and which suffering is basically only of incidental significance, of no value on the scale of lives and deaths that truly matter. Every human life is universal, as is every death. And what the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has taught us is how to free ourselves from the addiction to the memory of one's own suffering that characterizes all victimary

consciousness. Because freeing oneself from this addiction is the necessary condition for learning to speak a human language again and, potentially, to create a new world.

That said, apartheid consisted in establishing a total distinction between whites and everyone else (blacks, Indians and coloureds), in creating subdivisions within each of these groups, in translating these subdivisions into institutions and governmental technologies specific to each group, and in translating all of that into the geographical space by setting up Bantustans and by barring blacks from taking up residence in the cities. Before apartheid (which began in 1948), colonial ideology had in any case been based on the conviction that for "civilization" to advance it was necessary to wage war on the "inferior races". So there had, historically, been a specific way of depriving the blacks of their humanity. But in the vocabulary of South Africa, "negritude" included the Indians and the coloureds too: anyone who was not "white" was "black".

So I'd say that in contemporary South Africa the question of memory is posed in terms of a painful past, but also a past full of hope, which all protagonists try to accept as a basis for creating a new and different future. That presupposes the exposure of the suffering once inflicted on the weakest; that the truth, the whole truth, be told about their sufferings; that concealment, repression and denial be renounced in return for pardon, that is the desire on the part of everybody to begin everything again on the basis of a mutual recognition of humanity of each and every one, and of the right of everybody to life in freedom before the law.

What is striking is that a considerable part of the work of memorialization that is in progress is being carried out with this aim in mind. It translates, for instance, as the appropriate burial of the remains of those who died in the struggle, the erection of funeral steles where they fell, the consecration of trado-Christian religious rituals aimed at "curing" the survivors of anger and the desire for revenge, the creation of numerous museums and parks devoted to the celebration of people's common humanity, the encouragement of the arts, and above all the launch of policies of reparation aimed at making up for centuries of neglect (a roof, a school, a road, a clinic, clean water, electricity, and one person one vote).

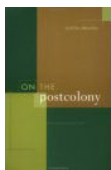
As can be seen, the work of memory is inseparable from meditation on the way to interiorizing the presence of the physical destruction of those who have been lost and reduced to dust. Meditation on that absence, and on ways of symbolically restoring what has been destroyed, here in large part consists in giving the theme of the sepulchre its full subversive force. But the sepulchre is not so much the celebration of death as the reference to the extra bit of life that's needed to raise the dead which lies at the heart of a new culture that *promises* never to forget the vanquished.

So this is an approach which both embraces and transcends the question of specificity. It is not without its tensions and contradictions. The process is not complete. The tensions can be seen in the way the de-racialization of urban spaces, as well as of institutions and the economy, is being carried out. In any event the future, viewed from this angle, is not some sort of afro-centrism, but what I'd call afropolitanism — a way of being "African" open to difference and conceived as transcending race.

Memory and responsibility

Esprit: In your book, *On the Postcolony. Studies on the History of Society and Culture*, you mention Cameroon frequently. In current controversies in France victims competing with each other — blacks from West Africa, from Martinique and from other islands — are taking up different positions. They are very mindful of what is said about their memory.

AM: In many respects my book adopts a different approach from that of most postcolonial thinking, if only over the privileged position accorded by the latter to questions of identity and difference, and over the central role that the theme of resistance plays in it. There is a difference, to my mind, between thinking about the "postcolony" and "postcolonial" thought. The question running through my book is this: "What is 'today', and what are we, today?" What are the lines of fragility, the lines of precariousness, the fissures in contemporary African life? And, possibly, how could what is, be no more, how could it give birth to something else? And so, if you like, it's a way of reflecting on the fractures, on what remains of the promise of life when the enemy is no longer the colonist in a strict sense, but the "brother"? So the book is a critique of the African discourse on community and brotherhood.



So it can be said that it is concerned with memory only insofar as the latter is a question, first of all, of responsibility towards oneself and towards an inheritance. I'd say that memory is, above all else, a question of responsibility with respect to something of which one is often not the author. Moreover I believe that one only truly becomes a human being to the degree that one is capable of answering to what one is not the direct author of, and to the person with whom one has, seemingly, nothing in common. There is, truly, no memory except in the body of commands and demands that the past not only transmits to us but also requires us to contemplate. I suppose the past obliges us to reply in a responsible manner. So there is no memory except in the assignment of such a responsibility.

Esprit: What is postcolonial thinking's position with regard to Europe? Is it an anti-European current of thought, or does it adopt Europe's values? Shouldn't the reflections of the postcolonial school be understood, too, as reflections on the decentring of European thought?

AM: postcolonial thought is not an anti-European thought. On the contrary, it's the product of the encounter between Europe and the worlds it once made into its distant possessions. In showing how the colonial and imperial experience has been codified in representations, divisions between disciplines, their methodologies and their objects, it invites us to undertake an alternative reading of our common modernity. It calls upon Europe to live what it declares to be its origins, its future and its promise, and to live all that responsibly. If, as Europe has always claimed, this promise has truly as its object the future of humanity as whole, then postcolonial thought calls upon Europe to open and continually relaunch that future in a singular fashion, responsible for itself, for the Other, and before the Other.

But postcolonial thought is also a dream: the dream of a new form of humanism, a critical humanism founded above all on the divisions that, this side of the absolutes, differentiate us. It's the dream of a *polis* that is universal because ethnically diverse. It's what, in his poetical writings, Senghor hoped for: the "rebirth of the world", which he speaks of in his "Prayer to the Masks", for example.

The thinking of the postcolony, on the other hand, is a thought of responsibility and life, seen through the prism of what belies both. It is in the direct lineage of certain facets of black thought (Fanon, Senghor, Césaire and others). It is a thought of responsibility, responsibility in terms of the obligation to answer for oneself, to be the guarantor of one's actions. The ethics underlying this thought of responsibility is the future of the self in the memory of what one has been in another's hands, the sufferings one has endured in captivity, when the law and the subject were divided.

Postcolonial thought cannot fail to be valid for the relationship between Europe and itself. If one were to apply the postulates of postcolonial theory to France, for example, one would say that since the time of the slave trade and colonization there is no French identity or French heritage sites that don't simultaneously encompass the elsewhere and the here. In other words, the elsewhere is a constituent of the here, and vice-versa. There is no longer an "inside" cut off from an "outside", a past cut off from the present. There is a time, that of the encounter with the Other, which unfolds constantly and which consists not of scission but of contraction, winding and joining. Here, in any case, is a map of the subject and a geography that makes it possible to pose in another way the burning questions of the suburban ghettos, the nation, even of immigration.

Esprit: Third-worldism is chiefly aimed at the United States. What is postcolonial theory's view about that?

AM: As far as I'm concerned the controversy is about the way in which, historically, successive US governments have claimed to build universalism and promote democracy on the basis of crimes that are presented as so many earthly fulfillments of God's law and divine providence. So it's the political theology of the American state that is what people have a problem with insofar as the god it invokes is a melancholy god, irascible and vengeful. Mercy has no part in his laws and precepts. He is a jealous and unforgiving god, swift to destroy and forever requiring human sacrifice.

This critique of the political theology underpinning American power-politics (hyper-hegemony) is absolutely necessary in the current climate. And in any case the best critiques of this theology come from the United States itself. How, indeed, can one claim to "make world" on the basis of a politics almost exclusively founded on a single question: Who is my enemy, mine, here and now, and how can I exterminate him?

So it's not the United States as such that people have a problem with, but an idea of politics and of the world that is closely associated with the history of the enemy — the enemy as an ontological, even theological entity in the sense that my enemy is, as a matter of principle, always the enemy of God — no more, no less — and the hatred I feel for him is, necessarily, a divine hatred.

I don't think one can "make world" on the basis of a relationship between human beings in which all idea of morality is suspended precisely at the moment when morality is constantly being invoked as acts of immorality and barbarism are being carried out. The global politics of the United States today is a politics that seeks to free itself from all constraints. In the name of security it seeks exemption from all responsibility. This politics of boundless irresponsibility must be subjected to a firm, intelligent and sustained critique.

Interview by Olivier Mongin, Nathalie Lempereur and Jean-Louis Schlegel

Published 2008-01-09
Original in French
Translation by John Fletcher
Contribution by Esprit
First published in Esprit 12/2006
© Achille Mbembe/Esprit
© Eurozine