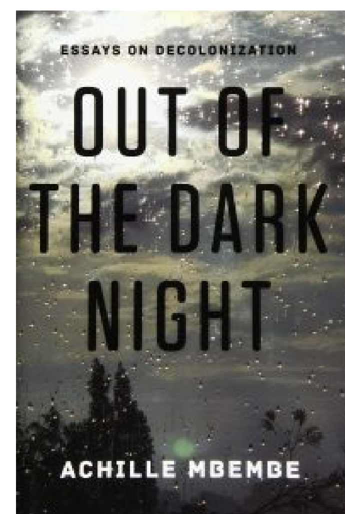
# Book Review: Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization by Achille Mbembe

*In* **Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization***,* **Achille Mbembe** *offers a new collection exploring the complexities of decolonisation, intervening in debates about French democracy, African modernity, the aspirations of postcolonial thought and the possibilities of imagining community on a planetary scale.* **Ayça Çubukçu** *reviews this poetic and consistently erudite work, exploring the vision of humanity that Mbembe imagines across the collection.*

***Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization*. Achille Mbembe (trans. by Daniela Ginsburg). Columbia University Press. 2021.**

**Decolonizing Humanity**




In his recent book, *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization*, critical theorist Achille Mbembe explores the complexities of decolonisation. In six essays and an epilogue, he intervenes in debates about French democracy, African modernity, the aspirations of postcolonial thought and the possibilities of imagining community on a planetary scale.

In the final essay of the book, Mbembe offers Afropolitanism as the name of a cosmopolitan vision for the future of humanity. 'As a matter of fact', he asserts, 'the destiny of our planet will be played out, to a large extent, in Africa. This planetary turn of the African predicament will constitute the main cultural and philosophical event of the twenty-first century' (222). Articulating his concept of Afropolitanism, Mbembe reassesses the intellectual, moral and political heritage of African nationalism. What he finds exceptionally salvageable in this heritage is 'the message of joy in a great universal future equitably open to all peoples, all nations, and all species' (229). To the extent that it is 'humanity' that bears the responsibility of creating this universal future — a humanity that is not given, but instead 'pulled up and created over the course of struggles' (229) — it will be instructive to explore the sort of humanity Mbembe imagines.

Mbembe recognises that while 'genomics has injected new complexity into the figure of the human', in the meantime, 'race has once again reentered the domain of biological truth, viewed now through the molecular gaze' (39). This is a threatening development for what he promotes as *the project of nonracialism*. While he does not articulate in detail what nonracialism demands, it is intimately intertwined with 'humanity itself' as a political project. 'At stake in the contemporary reconfigurations of race and racism is the splitting of humanity itself into separate species and subspecies as a result of market libertarianism and genetic technology,' Mbembe finds (40).

Here and elsewhere, despite his own warning that 'humanity is not given' (229), Mbembe writes as if racism is a way of splitting 'humanity itself' as a singular, composite and collective being. In such constructions, humanity is not only presumed to be a unique 'species', clearly discernable in its difference from other forms of life, but also postulated as *categorically indivisible* into minor components on the basis of race, nation, gender or class. Little room is left for appreciating the possibility that such 'splits' and 'divisions' themselves are different ways of imagining humanity — as a collection of nations, for instance, or as the transnational constituency of a global war between classes.

To the extent that ‘humanity itself’ is not an apolitical fact but a contested idea and ideal, its mobilisation in struggles for justice, including racial justice, needs careful examination. To raise one pressing question among others: what work does ‘humanity’ do as the constitutive language of a ‘nonracial’ world, especially in the context of ‘a contemporary neoliberal order that claims to have gone beyond the racial’ (41)? Besides the praxis of antiracism, this examination could extend to any politics that names and hierarchises qualities, desires or dispositions said to correspond to the essence of humanity — including, for example, Mbembe’s own identification of ‘this most human expectation of a life outside the law of the market and the right to property’ (33). While one could partake in Mbembe’s anti-capitalism, it is something else to ground it on expectations or qualities asserted as ‘most human’. To be polemical: how shall we think about human beings who have lived, struggled or killed for the right to property —are their expectations, inclinations, dispositions any less human?

It is Frantz Fanon, the psychiatrist and militant theorist of decolonisation, to whom Mbembe turns when proposing a politics of ‘ascent into humanity’ (229). Through Fanon, Mbembe finds that decolonisation aims at ‘radically redefining native being and opening it up to the possibility of becoming a human form of being rather than a thing’ (54). This possibility of becoming human requires, on the one hand, the affirmation of a different humanity, ‘the possibility of reconstituting the human after humanism’s complicity with colonial racism’ (54). On the other, it demands becoming one’s ‘own foundation’ in the creation of ‘forms of life that could genuinely be characterized as fully human’ (55).

What is a ‘fully human’ form of life? Is it possible to propose it without perpetuating hierarchies among different beings, humans and nonhumans alike, and their distinct ways of living and dying? What kinds of struggle does ‘ascent into humanity’ require if *the possibility of decolonising humanity is not given*? According to Mbembe, ‘ascent into humanity can only be the result of a struggle: the struggle for life’, which consists in rising up from the depths of the ‘extraordinarily sterile and arid region’ Fanon called race, or the zone of nonbeing (62). ‘To emerge from these sterile and arid regions of existence is above all to *emerge from the enclosure of race* — an entrapment in which the gaze and power of the Other seek to enclose the subject,’ insists Mbembe along with Fanon (62). While the task of decolonisation is ‘the disenclosure of the world’, race is an enclosure to be opened up and ultimately eradicated: ‘the disenclosure of the world presupposes the abolition of race’, he declares (63).

How can race be abolished? By becoming human, in Mbembe's eyes, by becoming a 'nonracial' being. In such a scheme, it is as if one can only become human as a nonracial being, while the only way to be nonracial is to become a human being. By implication, it appears, the more racialised one is, the less human, and the more human, the less racialised one is. A critical question arises, then, about the precise difference between the project of nonracialism and French republicanism, which exercises 'a color-blind universalism' (60) in its 'radical indifference to difference' (123) as Mbembe himself protests. Is the distinction between the two a matter of (not) recognising the implicit 'whiteness' of being human in the tradition of colonial humanism embodied by France? What happens after the implicit whiteness of the human has been recognised — is the task then to insist on the humanity of 'nonwhites', as Mbembe does, through (what can only be conceptualised as) *deracialisation*? How does the project of nonracialism differ from the insistence that we must be living in a postracial age where all lives matter? If we are to decolonise humanity, I submit, these are some of the questions to ponder.

Mbembe's *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization* is a humanist invitation to live up to humanity, to ascend to it from the depths of race and racialisation. At times poetic, consistently erudite, it is recommended reading even for those who, instead of leaving it behind, would rather take back the night.

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*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*

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