

BECOMING BLACK

*Coercive power, the state and racism
in a time of crisis*

Interview with Olúfémi Táíwò and Achille Mbembe



The Movement for Black Lives not only exposed the brutality of US policing, it has stimulated conversations on systemic racism and coercive state power everywhere. For TNI's tenth edition of State of Power, we were therefore delighted to bring together two brilliant thinkers on racial capitalism today. Achille Mbembe is a groundbreaking philosopher, whose many books since the mid 1980s have exposed how coloniality has shaped democracy, identity and modernity. Olufemi Taiwo is an emerging thinker, writer and activist whose theoretical work draws liberally from the Black radical tradition and anti-colonial thought. He has written extensively on climate justice. In this fascinating wide ranging conversation, they help us to understand modern day coercive state power, tracing its roots in colonialism and examining the way it has shaped our contemporary security.

Olufémi Táíwò



Photo by [Jared Rodríguez](#)

Achille Mbembe

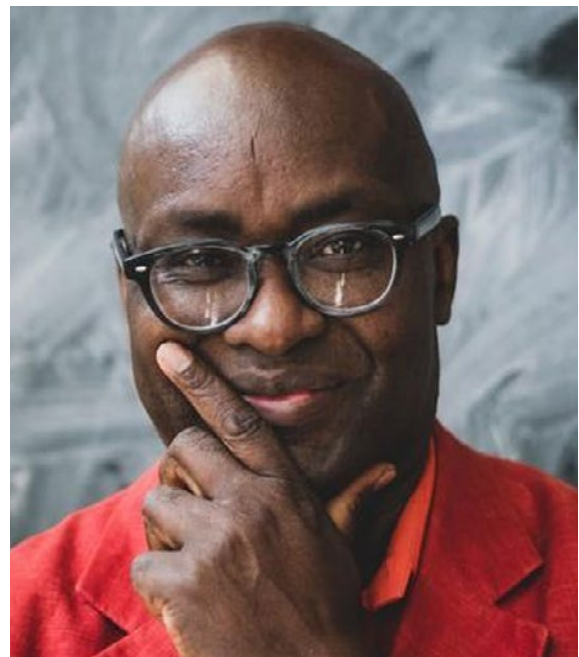


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Nick: *Why has this become an age of rising authoritarian state control? It seemed a few decades ago we were moving away from a world of authoritarianism with the fall of the Berlin Wall. There was a sense of the world opening up. And yet today we seem to be going in a different direction. How do you understand what is happening today?*

Achille: It is a very complex question. One way of looking at it is that Capitalism and Democracy have always been at loggerheads. In the aftermath of World War II, both systems came to a kind of compromise. There was a kind of tacit peace, as colonial systems were brought to an end, new states were integrated into a global system, even while the system remained deeply hierarchical. But since the end of the 20th century with, first globalization and the ongoing transformations of neoliberalism, both democracy and to some extent the state itself have been hollowed out.

Through a number of mechanisms, such as debt, states have become indebted to corporations and corporate power. What remains of the state is a coercive apparatus, put at the service of an economic system, whose main function is to trade on all life.

Together with a technological escalation, this has resulted in the acceleration of predatory practices. The explanation for the authoritarian turn, including of so-called liberal democracies, lies at the intersection of these multiple crises: the predatory take on life, technologisation and the plundering of the planet.

Olufemi: My understanding is quite similar. I suppose the only thing I would add is the larger backdrop of the five or so centuries of colonialism, where colonies were under a very explicit authoritarian rule and guided by explicit systems of racial apartheid.

The expectation that we were moving towards a period of freedom and liberal democracy reflects an exceptional time, based on geopolitical battle lines between the US and the Soviet Union. It was nonsensically portrayed as freedom loving liberal democracy against the freedom hating communist regimes, ignoring that so many states were under direct colonial, autocratic, imperial, racially-hierarchical control by the so-called liberal democracies.

And so when the geopolitical Cold War fight for hearts and minds was no longer in play, it's not surprising that what followed 1989 wasn't a period of serious liberal democracy and freedom, but rather unfettered state and private repression.

So in that context, how can we best understand coercive state power and violence as it is playing out today?

Achille: It seems to me that there are varying modes of state violence, inflicted on specific categories of populations – Blacks, minorities, women, the most vulnerable – by the police, prisons, military, border guards everywhere. Let's call it a machinic violence. It is direct, immediate, visible and is often murderous – as we saw with George Floyd and Brianna Taylor. The list is endless and it happens to masses of people who are killed, dislocated or expelled.

But we also have another 'slow' violence that is more distant, gradual and less perceptible. Here I'm drawing on [Rob Nixon's work](#) who describes a delayed destruction dispersed across time. That's how I perceive racism.

So we have these two forms of violence – the immediate visible form and the slow and delayed one, that together form an attritional apparatus which attacks not only the body but also the nerves. This apparatus is also more and more technologized, more and more algorithmic. Algorithmic racism will be the form of racism we will experience in the future, irradiating and becoming viral like a mutant power.

Contemporary racism lies in this interconnection between the radioactive and the viral. The challenge will be how fight this.



The violence of policemen against a demonstrator in the Maldives. A planned peaceful protest in November 2006 to express frustration with the slow pace of constitutional reforms required for fair multiparty election faced a brutal crackdown on freedom of assembly, travel and speech and the detention of over a hundred MDP activists, office holders and supporters in the run up to the demonstration. ©minivan

So could you define the agents of this brutality and what different roles do they play?

Olufemi: We have to understand what institutions such as the police were designed to do. I think that the answer to the question is pretty clear. They emerged from institutions such as slave patrols and *paramilitary groups* intended to discipline labor, and surveil and discipline immigrants and slaves.

In other words, they are largely about distributing insecurity. They don't exist to make society safe as a whole; they exist to make certain people, certain elements, certain groups within society safe, which is quite different.

And in terms of other institutions such as the army, I consider them different institutions that serve the same function. They have some distinctions in terms of how bound they are geographically, but these institutions fundamentally serve the same purpose and not surprisingly also share tactics, information, resources and information.

There are a lot of stark examples of how these institutions distribute insecurity, but as a Nigerian American person and with the rise of the #EndSARS protests, looking at Nigeria makes sense. [Afrobarometer did a survey recently](#) in which more than three quarters of Nigerian respondents reported paying bribes to the police. Many of them had paid bribes just to get regular police assistance, so it's clear that it's more of an institution of extortion rather than a security presence. It's hardly an institution that is 'serving and protecting', as they say here in the United States.

And so once we think of this aspect of coercive state power as about distributing security by distributing insecurity, it is no longer contradictory that we see the rise of militarized policing, incarceration and coloniality at the same time as the welfare state recedes. Because both of those are actually moving in the same direction to make some people secure while and by means of perpetuating the insecurity of other people.

Achille: I think what we are seeing rising in various societies across the world is the rise of armed racism. Of course armed racism is nothing new. The function of the police, of the army, of all the coercive arms of the state has to be understood within the racist architecture in which it emerged.

But we are seeing an increasing blurring of the divisions between the police and army, where the police have never been so militarised and is acting like an army against its own people. In the traditional political dispensation, the army deals with foreign enemies and police deals with internal order. But these divisions are breaking down, as well as the divisions between police and militia.

We are witnessing a worldwide and universal rearrangement of power and discriminatory violence. This leads some to being put to death prematurely and others not. You could also call it security or insecurity as Olufemi has discussed. It also reminds us once again that it was born in colonialism, which was the laboratory in which this modern order was experimented with and developed.

In terms of where it is going, I think the agents of brutalisation have become more decentralized than they have ever been before and more abstract. They still proceed through the traditional apparatuses of the state, such as the police, judicial system, the incarceration system. But beneath this lies the increasing role played by programming, as coercion is technologized.

In the way it redistributes brutality, programming is abstract as it codes people. This isn't just turning people into numbers, but rather turning them into a code, into data, that can be stored, circulated and also speculated on, including by finance capital. So there is a dematerialization of the state itself, as it cedes some of its functions to these technologies, which may seem neutral but are not. So although, we still have a policeman grabbing a black man in Minnesota and killing him by putting his knee on his neck, destruction of those deemed to be superfluous is also being outsourced to new machines.

Shaun: *How do we understand how this plays out in the Global South, both in terms of the colonial history but also post-colonial leaders and structures that continue to repress their peoples?*

Olufemi: In the longer history of colonialism, it has always been difficult for empires to project power outside of their actual geographic and social terrain so they have always sought to recruit natives into middle management positions and divide the people by empowering one section of the population. The trans-Atlantic slave trade could not have happened if it had only relied on European knowledge of trade networks and social relations.

Today important aspects of global social structures related to economic production and distribution of wealth are decided at multinational levels through the Bretton Woods institutions and in forms like the Doing Business Index. Their goal is to economically liberalize these countries, to facilitate the transnational governance of capital in the form of the corporation. So it is Microsoft and Motorola and Alphabet and steel manufacturers and big agribusiness that are from a materialist perspective, governing the world. Unless and until we grapple with that, I don't think we'll be in a position to understand the role of the state.

Achille: I think Olufemi explained it extremely well. Although there have been waves of decolonization, it is important to remember that even at the tail end of the 20th century, places such as South Africa (and much of Southern Africa) were still under a rather vicious form of colonialism, settler colonialism, predicated on the idea that certain races are superior to others.

So while a kind of decolonization has happened, it doesn't mean that colonialism has ended. Some parts of the world are still under colonial occupation, places like Kashmir, Palestine and others. But more importantly, coloniality has remained. This is a mode of ruling in which certain people are deemed disposable and yet indispensable. This is how racial rule worked. We need your muscles, your work, but we are also entitled to dispose of you in the way we want. It's this dialectic of dispensability and indispensability that is accelerating today, leading to a politics of abandonment, a politics of neglect.

Shuan: *So how do we escape that coloniality in the South as well as the Global North?*

Olufemi: We need to develop a genuinely structural politics. The solution is clearly not as simple as putting someone who looks like you in power. The trouble with identity politics is its focus on who's bad and who's good, who's the oppressor and who's the oppressed, who is the victim and who is the victimizer. But any sensible history of colonialism shows the contribution and complicity of African merchants, slavers and state bureaucrats. We need to understand the structural reasons for domination, racism, and forge a less predatory form of politics.

So if you look at housing insecurity or incarceration, for example, here in the US or internationally, you will see stark racial divisions. But the reasons for that are complicated and the solutions will be too. We need to structure our political world so that we defend each other's safety rather than defend some people's profit margins or some people's pretensions to control or desire to perpetuate a colonial politics, as Achille has explained.

Nick: *How should social movements relate to the state in this struggle? In the face of corporate power and market forces, the state is seen as an important bulwark to protect its citizens from capital, yet as we have discussed social movements also face the most violence from the state.*

Olufemi: It's right that there is something of a tension, but it's worth pointing out that it's not coercive power as such that movements for justice should oppose. The Cuban revolutionaries, the Mozambican Liberation Front, the fighters of Cape Verde, Angola and Zimbabwe all used coercive power in order to rid themselves of colonialism. Sometimes the conversation about coercive power in the guise of the state or anyone else gets excessively moralized. Power in general is a tool, and how we morally evaluate it depends on how it's used and to what ends.

Having said that, I think what we should focus on is finding ways to exploit the state and more specifically, exploit the differences between the interests of the state and of capital. State and capital have been too 'buddy buddy' over the past few decades, and the inability of social movements to play one off against the other has led to the neoliberal consensus. And that has led to the politics of abandonment and to contractions in state responsibilities without compensatory gains for most of the people on the earth.

And so I think demands for public control of the state and for assigning the state responsibility for roles that have been taken up by purely extractive corporate colonial institutions is a good tactical option.

Nick: What do you consider are some of the changing dynamics you see going forward related to coercive state power?

Achille: In a book I published a few years ago, I referred to something I called the 'Becoming Black of the World'. In the western Atlantic world under plantation slavery, people deemed to be black used to be ruled under very specific dispensation, the *Code Noir*, the Black code. This was a juridical mechanism that allowed rulers to treat so-called Black people in a way no one else was treated.

Today we can see neoliberalism is in crisis and thus has to rely more and more on an illiberal state to buttress its goals. This means that more and more people will be ruled under the Black Code. More people will be governed as if they were Black people, with all that entails: wanton violence, disenfranchisement, exposure to all kinds of risks, premature death.

This universalisation of the Black code will be going on as the world is burning, the planet is burning, having reached its limits. So because of ecological breakdown, our world is becoming more and more inhospitable to life itself. So if we reflect on planetary habitability, then we have to think seriously about how to create convergences between the struggle against racism and ecological struggles to regenerate our planet. The two are inseparable.

The third dynamic will be technological change, which has become our biotope, the milieu or environment which is increasingly defining who we are as well as our future. This will involve new struggles to recapture technology for human emancipation as well as emancipation at large. We need an emancipation, which includes humans and non humans, because the fate of the humans is now more than ever before tied to the fate of other species. The times we live in require a multi-species project.

Olufemi: I could not possibly agree more with what Achille said. If I could, I would shout it from an air horn everywhere in the world.

I think the analysis of the *Code Noir* and the way it has led to a racially stratified world is key. One thing that people may acknowledge but don't seem to integrate into their more systemic picture is that actually being Black did not necessarily mean you were enslaved in the sense of chattel slavery. There were also populations of freed people, mixed race people who experienced a different mixture of political restrictions and political rights. Yet being Black meant that that it *could* happen to you and that it was very likely if you were in the wrong part of the world in the wrong century.

That is not to diminish the history of racial domination, but clarify the nature of the system. Similarly, if we look at the other end of the pole of the racial hierarchy, being white didn't mean that you were in charge, it meant that there was a floor, a level of labor exploitation that you wouldn't get below, that you wouldn't be treated as property.

I think reconfiguring these categorical terms into probabilistic terms helps make sense of [Ruth Wilson Gilmore's definition of racism](#) as group differences and vulnerability to premature death as well as Achille's point about how the world in an era of ecological and climate crisis is becoming blacker.

A lot of the rights and privileges that some people treated as built into whiteness are in fact contingent on the particular social structure they live in, their wealth and power to distribute it in discriminatory ways. So it's because the United States has the wealth that it was able to create a middle class that had

economic privileges above and beyond its racialized underclass. Rights and freedom are contingent upon a people's nation, its geopolitical position, which is contingent on economic production. These in turn are contingent on the sky, the rain, the air and the water, the plants and the animals, things that we will no longer have the luxury of taking for granted in this century.

And so the rights and protections that people think are categorically built into their position in the social hierarchy are in fact contingent on the particular ways that the world has developed and also changing.

Most of us who are able bodied and resourced have long had the privilege of going outside unmasked, and yet now find ourselves unable to do the things that we thought were built into our social position. We find ourselves being denied that expected privilege for reasons related to happenings in the natural world and responses from our social system. That's increasingly going to be the story of the politics of the century.

We have to realise our fate is linked to the fate of the entire human species – and not the fake species that race portrays itself as – as well as tied to our dependence on the larger ecology, animals, plants, air, the water. Until we can see our fates are connected, we'll be in trouble.

But there's reassuring actions in that direction. To give just two sets of examples: In the United States, where I'm based, there are exciting trends in labor movements. There's been a resurgence of "[Bargaining for the Common Good](#)" – a practice of organized workers making contract demands in partnership with and in pursuit of benefits for a broader community. What's more: last year in Minneapolis, thousands of members of the Service Employees International Union (many of whom were immigrants from countries including Somalia, Nepal, Mexico, and Ecuador) led what some are calling the "[first climate strike](#)" in US history: bargaining explicitly over wages, gender discrimination, *and* changes to working conditions to lower the carbon emissions of their work.

In South Africa, there are attempts to build broader, people-centered social and political ecologies: from community kitchens and public food gardens at the University of the Free State to the wider struggle for food sovereignty throughout the country. These [efforts are important](#) alongside the national [Climate Justice Charter's](#) (CJC) attempts to combat corporate control over water. The CJC also connects these to community ownership of renewable energy. Taken together, it's a really instructive set of struggles that is worth learning from. And if we can learn from it, we can develop a version of it in our own locations.

This is an edited transcript of a conversation with Olúfémi Táíwò and Achille Mbembe led by Nick Buxton and Shaun Matsheza of TNI. **Achille Mbembe** is a philosopher, political scientist, and public intellectual and a professor at the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research in Johannesburg, South Africa. His many works include *On the Postcolony* (2001), *Critique of Black Reason* (2016), *Necropolitics* (2019), *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization* (2020) and *Brutalisme* (2020). [Olúfémi Táíwò](#) is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Georgetown University and a frequent writer on issues of climate justice, racism, and colonialism.