

# Racist Democracies

*Tommy J. Curry on the role demographics of death and dying have in racializing Covid-19 mortalities*

The death and societal upheaval of Covid-19 have spread an eerie awareness of the fragility of Western societies. The pretence of civilisation, or rather the presumption that Western nations are culturally, economically, and governmentally superior to those of Africa and the East, increasingly seems to make less sense as the death tolls of the world's *free citizenry* continue to rise and the freedom of movement between Western nations remains denied. Within the suffering of various groups of disadvantaged peoples across the world, there have been visible patterns of death that appear to illuminate stark racial and ethnic divides throughout American and British society. In the *Guardian*, Robert Booth and Caelnin Barr reported that “Black people are more than four times more likely to die from Covid-19 than white people.” Drawing from findings of the Office of National Statistics, Booth and Barr explained that “areas with high ethnic minority populations in England and Wales tended to have higher mortality rates in the pandemic.” The pattern of higher mortality rates for Blacks compared to whites is no different in the United States. An editorial by the Brookings Institute written by Tiffany Ford, Sarah Reber, and Richard Reeves recently explained that “The crude death rate for Black people is twice that for whites, and the crude death rate for Hispanic/Latinos is similar to that of whites ... The

age-adjusted Covid-19 death rate for Black people is 3.6 times that for whites, and the age-adjusted death rate for Hispanic/Latino people is 2.5 times that for whites.”

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The higher rates of infection and mortality within Black and other ethnic minority groups have provided evidence for a seemingly endless array of philosophical positions. Marxists and theorists of political economy have suggested that being poor Black and working-class illuminates the need for understanding racial capitalism, or as the late Cedric Robinson explained in *Black Marxism*, how the “development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions.” Focusing primarily on occupations, labour conditions, and the economic exploitation of the lower classes, these scholars assert that the socio-economic conditions of the Black, Brown, and Indigenous people in the United States and abroad predict health out-



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comes. Other scholars such as Erick Larson have suggested that Covid-19 illuminates how biopower functions in America. In “The Endemic Pandemic: Ruminations on American Biopower under Covid-19”, he writes: “Foucault’s description of biopower as pervading the everyday life of modern peoples raises a question about our present emergency: is the troubling arithmetic of life and death, of rights and bodies, manifest in American pandemic governance the exception, or biopower’s ‘endemic’ rule?” Extending her argument from *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* in an interview entitled *Coronavirus Capitalism*, Naomi Klein suggested that “Trump’s plan is: a pandemic shock doctrine, featuring all the most dangerous ideas lying around, from privatizing Social Security to locking down borders to caging even more migrants. Hell,

he might even try canceling elections.”

These aforementioned theories share the presumption of the anomaly or the idea that outside of capitalist exploitation, emergency or disaster, the world could, nay, it would be capable of sustaining Black life. These theories assert that the world without these political maladies would be better for Black people, but has a world without Black people dying ever been realised, or even possible in the West? Shared between these conceptual orientations is this premise that I believe must be eradicated from our normative interiority to achieve a more accurate intellectual endeavour in our exploration of racism and anti-Blackness. These theories have generated various explanations to interpret our present circumstances and the disparities that seem to follow patterns of social inequality of which race

is but one. However, what specifically are the theories of racism that allow philosophers and scholars to think more concretely about the patterns of racism that continue to result in higher death rates, injury, and in this case infection than that of the dominant white racial groups? There is a tendency for philosophers to conceptualise the world through a commitment to the theories they believe allow their worldview to cohere. It is no surprise then that the theories associated with questions of race, death, and democratic malfeasance come to be explanatory theories concerning the responses to the pandemic. While social and hard sciences must constantly revise their theories and thinking about Covid-19 given discoveries and inconsistencies with previous knowledge, philosophy prides itself on the extension and subsuming of new knowledge within previously held worldviews. As such, there has been no shortage of theories and thinking about the impact Covid-19 has on racial minorities, ethnic groups, and economically disadvantaged communities, but little theoretical explanation as to why the pandemic continues to illuminate and infect the most marginalised of these societies.

*Racism is not an  
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What explains why a biological pestilence like Covid-19 follows the social-political borders of race and ethnicity in the United States? Racism within Western societies organises the societal structure and individual

aspiration. Racist societies operate through hierarchies that are sustained by individual action that aspire to continue existing patterns of inequality and create new dynamics that allow the dominant white race as in the case of the United States and the United Kingdom to maintain the wealth and power to manage subordinate racial groups. Previous theories interpret phenomena and leave the question of racism and racial interests undefined and vacuous. While it is certainly true that capitalism, biopower, and the chrono-politics of our current crisis do affect racial and ethnic groups, why does it do so? What is the underlying motivation or logic of racism that permits a spontaneous outbreak of Covid-19 to be utilised in such a way?

**On the Necropolitical and the Limits of Breathing as a Metaphor**

Despite the various analyses that correctly draw attention to aspects of democratic failure within Western nations, the failures found to exist within Western democratic societies remain theorised as exceptions. The tyranny of slavery throughout the nineteenth century and the horrors of genocide and apartheid regimes throughout the world in the twentieth century somehow convinced generations of theorists that the answer to the oppression of groups within a society is more democracy. As such, these events were imagined to be beyond the salvage of the democratic order. Based on the assumption that democratic capitalist societies were more peaceful than state-run communist societies, social-political theorists sought to make the rational individual and ethically democratic society the basic template for understanding and imagining the solution to social inequality and ra-

cialised death. As the twenty-first century moves forward it has become apparent that the assumption that Western democratic societies are necessarily more peaceful than other forms of government, especially towards Black peoples, may have been arrived upon prematurely. Perhaps based on ideological comparisons with conflicting foreign nations in the late twentieth century rather than evidence of a successful democratic project towards racial groups within America's borders. How one accounts for the necessity of death imparted by the state through the right of the sword within free democratic societies has become of central concern for many contemporary theorists.

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Following Michel Foucault's analysis of biopower, Achille Mbembe explains in *Necropolitics* that he is most concerned with the "figures of sovereignty whose central project is not the struggle for autonomy but the generalised instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations". Mbembe emphasises the way by which "weapons are deployed in the interest of maximally destroying persons and creating death-worlds, that is, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the living dead". In a recent reflection on the Covid-19 crisis

entitled "The Universal Right to Breathe", Mbembe urges his readers of the need to exceed the sovereign to conceptualise the constriction of our ability to breathe as "everything that condemns the majority of humankind to a premature cessation of breathing, everything that fundamentally attacks the respiratory tract, everything that, in the long reign of capitalism, has constrained entire segments of the world population, entire races, to a difficult, panting breath and life of oppression". Our universal right to breathe is then a radical declaration of the right to life that not only aims to defy the biological consequence of Covid-19, but the necropower of the nations we find ourselves in that fail to care for the bodies it sees as external to itself.

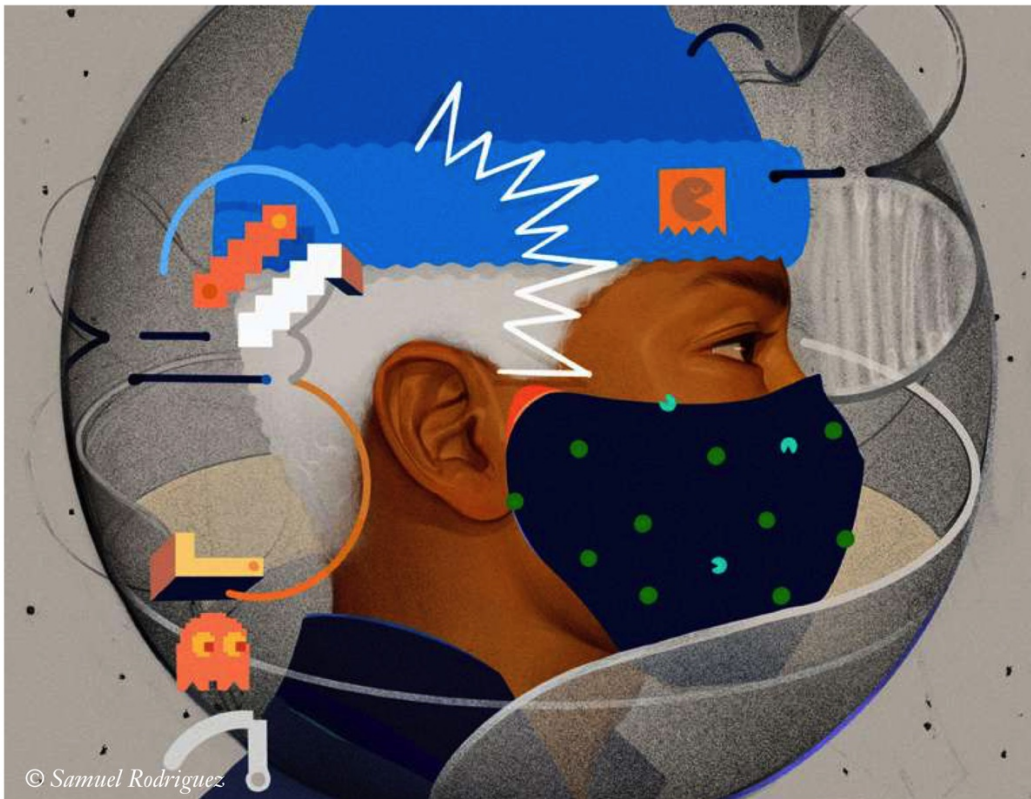
The constraints to breathing, the imposing force that suppresses the expansion of one's lungs, follows a logic on its own. Covid-19 is no longer thought to be a respiratory disease. According to a recent study in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, "respiratory virus SARS-CoV-2, which causes Covid-19, causes severe damage to blood vessels, leading to widespread thrombosis". Covid-19 attacks the blood vessels of a body, causing clots and consequently organ failure. While Mbembe is correct that the lungs are attacked, the lungs fail because the body itself fails. As Dr. William Li, president and director of the Angiogenesis Foundation explains: "These clots can become lethal because they severely compromise blood flow not only in the lungs, but also in other organs such as the brain and heart, among other tissues." He continues: "If Covid-19 damages our vessels, the long-term effects could be devastating even after the virus is cleared."



*Forum*

In some ways, Mbembe's metaphor fails to capture the magnitude of the devastation forced upon the body by Covid-19. The body itself is starved of blood. There is no recovery from the imposition – the violence of the virus. It biologically scars and impairs the flesh and makes the affected body into a different kind – a distinct genre. Covid-19 creates obstacles that prevent the body from functioning and ultimately leads to organ failure which was not previously thought based on the virus being housed in the lungs, but from the clots developing throughout the body that kill the *bios*. If one restates Mbembe's metaphor concerning the right to breathe based on these more recent find-

ings of Covid-19, one might say that there are bodies that are *dying* and consequently made incapable of realising their biological intentionality towards life. Rather than being of a kind/genre capable of life but denied the ability to live freely, a kind/genre that is the "living dead", there are bodies who are born *dying*. These bodies demonstrate an incapacity for life. The ontogeny of dying bodies has no optimal stage of life; they are always already moving towards their expiration. This is what I intend to describe as racism and what is materialised as anti-Blackness. Mbembe supposes a normal and free self – the stranger, the cosmopolitan traveller who can escape and can find



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life beyond the necropolitical. I intend to convey that racism, specifically anti-Blackness, is a logic that links death and dying to Blackness itself. The world of constraint described by Mbembe – the machinations of enmity that continuously produce otherness – are not constructs or technologies utilised by the sovereign, these machinations constitute the sovereign’s will – it urges to be. Said differently, the sovereign is materialised with these capacities to kill and the intention to prohibit certain bodies from realising life. In this sense, what Mbembe calls necro-power precedes the political because the denial of life accompanies the organising principle of the construct, we name Blackness. Mbembe imagines a Black body as a human body capable of health and able to be freed from necro-politics, I cannot.

#### **Racism and Demographics of Death and Dying**

Upon the corpses of the disadvantaged and disposable, the bourgeois class of American and European intellectuals have created, from their collective need to attend to the pandemic, new products for intellectual consumption. Theories that can be consumed by other academics and an anxious public as remedies and programs of interpreting this present moment. Black people are dying but explaining that Black people are dying in terms of biopower, intersectionality, or the usurpation of individual rights, etc., allows disciplinary knowledge to cohere. In this way, racism and the death racism causes can be *conceptualised correctly*, even though *theory* cannot eliminate racism or make the deaths of Black people cease.

Because theorists misunderstand what racism is and how it functions within fully

mature and flourishing democratic societies, our philosophical and normative systems assume that the recognition of the deaths of Black people and other racialised groups can be remedied by the grace of benevolent whites. Their recognition can bring about life and end death. Racism is not an accidental feature of Western societies.

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For Black peoples, racism has meant deliberate violence against, and the deliberate deaths of, their populations. What confronts the philosopher and citizen is not the realisation of this fact of anti-Blackness, but the realisation that racism organises chaos in such a way that the white racial group – even when burdened by catastrophe and death – emerge from the chaos more advantageously than Blacks and other races. Said differently, in white supremacist nations there seems to be an ethos between the state and white citizens, and the white group and the individuals comprising the white race, that no matter how many whites may die, the deaths of Blacks and other racialised minorities will always be greater.

Covid-19 is not simply about a crisis that introduces shock or disruption into multiple

political systems, it is also an event that has been weaponised to achieve a diminishing of the Black population in the United States and the Caribbean. It is a technology in bio/necropolitical sense that has been repurposed to serve very specific ends in the United States and the United Kingdom. Black prisoners have been disproportionately infected from Covid-19. Trump has sent people who have tested positive to Haiti, Mexico, and other nations of the Global South. By deliberate act or neglect, the population-level consequences of racism disadvantage racial and ethnic groups more than the dominant racial group.

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Racism is an organising principle in Western societies that guides mortality and seeks to manage the growth of racial populations that compete with white populations through violence and death. As Derrick Bell wrote in *Gospel Choirs: Psalms of Survival in an Alien Land Called Home*, “We have never understood that the essence of the racism we contended against was not simply that we were exploited in slavery, degraded by segregation, and frustrated by the unmet promises of equal opportunity. The essence

of racism in America was the hope that we who were Black would not exist.” To explain the intentionality of society for certain racial groups to not exist requires a radically new understanding of racism beyond both individual malice and institutional bias. Racism is a societal logic shared by and within the dominant group and concretised as social systems. As I argued in *The Man-Not: Race, Class, Genre, and the Dilemmas of Black Manhood*,

“Racism is a complex nexus, a cognitive architecture used to invent, reimagine, and evolve the presumed political, social, economic, sexual, and psychological superiority of the white races in society, while materializing the imagined inferiority and hastening the death of inferior races. Said differently, racism is the manifestation of the social processes and concurrent logics that facilitate the death and dying of racially subjugated peoples.”

The consequence of understanding racism as deliberate social processes designed to achieve horrific ends is that we come to understand racial disparity as the product of a racist architecture. The economic and political segregation of Black people throughout Western societies results in demographics that are particularly vulnerable to disease and health-related deaths. Disease and worse health outcomes guarantee that the affected populations are not a reproductive threat to the demographic dominance of the white race. These demographics of death and dying are deliberately designed apparatus found throughout the democratic infrastructure of the United States and the United Kingdom. These groupings predetermine the life

course of non-white racial groups. Specifically, the bodies stained by Blackness are imposed upon by poverty, neglect, exposure to violence, and disease with greater frequency than the majority population. This violence aims to place Black bodies in environments and create conditions that would induce negative health effects and result in an epigenetic degradation within members of the subjugated racial group.

Racism, rather than simply being an individual predilection or systemic malady, guides and in many ways determines the outcome of inter-*group* interactions. The various societal forces directed against Black populations are not accidental or random. Health disparities emerge from sustained structural, societal, and individual level impositions on Black populations. The failure to treat Black Covid-19 patients is intimately related to the goal of not allowing Black and other racialised populations access to healthcare. The higher infection rates and mortality of Blacks from Covid-19 achieve the same goals as mass incarceration, police killings, and maternal death. These racist practices lessen the overall population, the life expectancy, and ability of the Black race to reproduce at rates that would threaten the demographic and political superiority of the white race. This is what I intend to convey through *dying*. Racism sociogenically determines the Black population to be a weaker racial stock and concretises conditions within society to make the ideological belief of racial inferiority an actual material reality. In these societies, hierarchies are created and sustained by consent and coercion to produce a distribution of cultural and capital resources making racial groups, especially Blacks, have lesser political pow-

er, social regard, and more societal malice directed towards them than the dominant white group.

**Conclusion:**

The consequences of Covid-19 have been epochal. Rather than retreat into previously articulated theories that replicate our assumptions about democratic societies and our romantic expectations of democracy, the theorist should pause for a moment to consider how a random virus has come to illuminate not only the divisions between racial groups but become weaponised against them. Philosophers have become far to content with descriptive theories that attribute the cause of inequity to their chosen theoretical accounts. There is an urgency to conceptualise and verify the manifestations of racism beyond our appeal to the denials of fairness or equality in society. Throughout the United States and the United Kingdom, Covid-19 has provided an opportunity to achieve the ends of war without having to declare war upon Black populations, and it is necessary to understand why.

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