Privatization and Categorization of Death

An Essay on Necropolitics and the Legitimation of Violence in the Contemporary World

Lejnad Hnát

4.8.2025

Contents

After an unbelievably long time, the Czech public is finally beginning – slowly – to awaken from the dream in which the State of Israel figured as a perfect and innocent state merely defending itself against a barbaric terrorist attack. Nevertheless, we can still hear dehumanizing statements from the mouths of some politicians addressing the Palestinian population, which frame the ongoing ethnic cleansing in a black-and-white manner as a battle of good versus evil, placing the democratic State of Israel in the position of good and all other Arab countries in the position of evil.

I was particularly outraged by the words of Petr Fiala, spoken at some pre-election debates and addressed to pro-Palestinian activists. Petr Fiala, whose public image is built on that of a calm, balanced, and rational professor seeking to communicate with the public, deconstructs himself during these debates, as the question of Palestine and Israel awakens strong emotions in him and some of his arguments lack any logical coherence. In addition, activists in Olomouc were forbidden from attending the debate with banners, so they resourcefully procured promotional balloons on which they added slogans such as "Complicity in genocide." What is even worse – and what I personally, as an anarchist, do not understand and find absolutely repugnant – is this sense of superiority over other human beings. In the debates, Fiala casts himself into the role of an authority that must "set straight" the opinions of others – especially those of his opponents – which makes debate impossible, because such communication does not involve two equal parties speaking with one another, but rather creates a relationship of dominance and submissiveness. Moreover, the very course of the discussion is quite unbalanced, since the other side cannot respond to the logical inconsistencies that Fiala considers to be "setting things straight."

This text thus arose as a response to the words of Petr Fiala and will primarily work with the theme of death and the concept of necropolitics as developed in the work of Achille Mbembe. It will seek to demonstrate why the aforementioned publicly expressed views are problematic from the perspective of power and discourse. The main aim of this essay will be an analysis of death and an examination of political power that governs death, while also attempting to answer the question of how the individualization of death in the modern Western world leads to the legitimation of unjust treatment. Among other things, this text will focus on the role of Israel and the way its actions are presented in the media. It does not claim to be a complete description of the conflict. However, it must be added that the actions of Hamas, including attacks on the civilian population, constitute serious violations of international law and in themselves contribute to the deepening of suffering in the region. Given the scope of the text, and also due to the current pro-Israeli discourse, I have nevertheless decided to devote myself exclusively to an analysis of the Israeli side.

Biopolitics, Necropolitics, and Death as a Form of Political Power

Achille Mbembe is a Cameroonian political scientist and historian who, in his work *Necropolitics. Theory in Forms*, builds upon the French thinker Michel Foucault and his theses on biopolitics and biopower. Foucault argued that roughly until the 17th and 18th centuries, the power held by the aristocracy was characterized by the privilege of deciding over the lives of subjects – to kill or to let live. During the 18th and 19th centuries, however, this power in Western society transformed into a somewhat different form of control, enabled by the strengthening tendencies of liberalism in the West, during which life itself became an object of political interest. More than

power as a form capable of forcing a person to do something, Foucault was concerned with power as productive, as a creative force capable of producing various structures, categories, norms, and habits.

Foucault posed the question: If there are infinitely many ways to perform an activity (for example, to live one's own life), what determines which of these ways is the correct or proper one? The answer is the aforementioned biopower, which is closely linked to Foucault's concept of the subject. From the 19th century onward, the subject becomes an object of scientific analyses and studies, and thus becomes an object of science, which subsequently issues various conclusions and judgments that subjects adopt as truth, internalize, and further work with. A human being is therefore not merely described but is simultaneously constructed; the human being is instrumentalized into an obedient mass. Historically, we speak of so-called rationalization, which can penetrate virtually all components of everyday life – recently, for example, I was struck by the book *Život na příděl* (*Life on Rations*), which deals with the Czech working class during the First World War and maps in considerable detail how "factory-like" dehumanization of the Czech working population occurred through rationalization and science.

Biopower rests on two pillars: disciplinary power and regulatory power. While discipline focuses primarily on individual bodies with the aim of creating disciplined, obedient, and productive bodies – through educational institutions such as schools, prisons, barracks, factories, or hospitals – regulatory power, by contrast, focuses on the population as a whole, on the mass, with the aim of managing life, regulating it, prolonging it, and reducing the risks of death. Mbembe builds on this concept with so-called necropolitics, that is, a certain development of biopower that does not focus solely on various aspects of life but also on death itself. Mbembe seeks to demonstrate and prove that certain forms of oppression and violence have always been an integral part of politics, even that of the so-called democratic state. Although a state may behave in a democratic manner in many respects, we must not forget one fundamental fact – the state is still just a state, a form of legalized violence governed by a legal system that is constantly changing. Mbembe himself writes: "The ultimate expression of sovereignty lies in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die. To kill or to allow to live thus constitutes the limits of sovereignty, its fundamental attributes. To be sovereign is to exert control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power." Necropower has the capacity to produce two different categories: entities that have the right to live and entities that must die. Not only life itself, but also death and the fear of death thus become tools for governing and controlling the population – in essence, it is the same mechanism that the aristocracy applied to its subjects until the 18th century, only now in a far more concealed form. Populations are not merely governed; some must be sacrificed.

This concealment is visible even today, particularly in the topic of death itself, which is considered an exclusively private matter. Death is today one of the greatest taboos, something people try to avoid in conversation. This self-censorship is present not only in private conversations between friends but also on public social networks, which seek to prevent any manifestations of death – whether in the form of videos or photographs depicting death – entirely, through the laws of legal states or the rules of internet platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and others. Of course, it cannot be claimed that every state adopts the same laws concerning death or that every internet platform introduces identical rules aimed at erasing death from the public space; however, a certain tendency to restrict such content does exist today. Whereas in the past sovereign power manifested itself through public, demonstrative executions, today power manifests itself

through censorship and tabooization, as if death and its direct representation did not belong in the public space of today's world and "modern" civilization. Whereas in the past death was a public drama and a manifestation of power, today it is rather pushed out of the public sphere into the realm of the private by that same power.

Death, however, has always been and continues to be a public, political topic and a political tool. In the past, for example, our perception of death was strongly influenced by Christian faith, which created two opposing categories: "proper" and "improper" death. Proper death, which every good Christian was supposed to strive for, consisted of a calm and slow dying at home, in one's own bed, surrounded by close friends and even enemies with whom the dying person was to make peace before death, so that they could depart calmly for the afterlife; the presence of a clergyman, who was to accompany the dying person through death, was also important. Improper death, by contrast – one that inspired terror in every Christian – was entirely sudden, restless, somewhere on the road away from home, often violent and in the absence of a clergyman. Such an improper death was meant to prove that the person in question was a bad Christian whom God had punished with an unchristian death. This construct was abused in political struggle – for example, during the fragmentation of the unified Christian world in the 16th century, when Europe split into Protestant and Catholic branches. The Catholic side often used precisely the construct of improper death in connection with the death of Martin Luther, claiming that since he was an improper Christian and a heretic, he died an unchristian death, thereby attempting to demonize him and simultaneously warn and frighten Christians away from converting to Protestantism. We may also mention another strongly politicized construct of death: heroic death for the Christian faith during the Crusades. This construct is still alive today, albeit in a different, more modern guise: to fall heroically for the homeland, for the nation. On this issue and on the mechanism of adopting Christian processes and symbols during the formation of modern nations in the 19th century, see for example the highly stimulating publication by Jan Randák, *Kult mrtvých. Smrt a umírání v revoluci 1848* (*The Cult of the Dead. Death and Dying in the Revolution of 1848*). Simply put, death has been a political topic throughout all documented history, although today it is somewhat forgotten and no longer discussed as openly in public.

Why, then, is death today so tabooized and perceived as a private matter, although in the past it was experienced as a public event? The tabooization and privatization of this sphere correspond precisely to the concept of biopower, whose main object of interest is life and its control – at least in contemporary Western states. Decision-making about death has retreated into the background. Death signifies the end of discipline, the end of control over the body; death lies outside the control of biopower, outside the control of life, but not outside the control of power as such. Death is a failure of biopower, and thus biopower seeks to render it invisible, while making visible only such deaths as are useful: martyrdom, heroic death, the inscription of such deaths into collective memory, forgetting, and so on. This is why so many Western states gradually ceased state-run public executions in the name of biopower – executions that were so popular in the past and that constituted an expression of sovereign power. The marginalization of death with the advent of biopower has likely caused death to become such a taboo in the public sphere. Today, states present themselves to varying degrees as no longer deciding over death, as concentrating all their power on life, which they seek to preserve by all possible means. This enables death to be understood as something entirely private, into which nothing else intervenes. This may also explain why opinions are so often heard claiming that the Palestinian population is responsible for its own suffering and death. If we understand death exclusively as something pri-

vate, non-systemic, and stripped of any context, we then slide toward an understanding of death based solely on personal responsibility – individualized death, for which only we ourselves are responsible. This resembles the neoliberal narrative of responsibility for one's own successes and failures, which in the contemporary capitalist system functions as pressure for maximum work efficiency and often ends in burnout.

Indeed, a significant portion of contemporary wars – which are de facto collective decisions over who may live and who must die – have been initiated in the name of life and its protection, thereby reinforcing the narrative that people are entirely responsible for their own deaths. If we must kill others in order to survive, then responsibility for death rests solely with those who die. If they had not threatened others, no one would have had to attack them. Death in this case is not understood as an unjust crime committed by the state, but as a necessity for which the killed are responsible. While power collectively decides over life and death, it simultaneously creates a narrative that individualizes and privatizes this responsibility. Death is thus not presented as a political and collective act, but as the personal fate of an individual. This contradiction is not accidental; it serves to conceal the true nature of violence and to maintain power. Today, wars are no longer launched due to explicitly proclaimed colonial or "civilizing" goals of the white man's burden; today, wars are launched in the name of rescue and self-defense, and can therefore easily be declared preventive and thus, at least from a moral standpoint, entirely legitimate – consider, for example, the current situation between Israel and Iran, which fully corresponds to the framework of biopower focused on the preservation of life. One may also mention the current war initiated by Russia against Ukraine, in which the elites of the Russian government attempt to promote a narrative in which Russia is defending itself against Western aggression, or is denazifying Ukraine, or protecting the lives of the Russian minority, thereby legitimizing the war. The same applies to the current ethnic cleansing in Gaza conducted by democratic Israel, during which Israel argues self-defense of the nation and protection of Israeli lives. What else is happening here if not decision-making over who may live and who must die? What else if not decision-making over life and death, only in a far more concealed form? Power no longer explicitly decides whom it will kill; it now implicitly decides through biopower – so that in order to preserve our life, we must kill and end the life of another. We kill others in the name of life. If we must kill others to survive, how can we mourn them? How can we grieve for them when they are responsible for their own death because they threatened us? This is the other, darker side of biopolitics – the invisible necropower of the sovereign, which exploits humanity's age-old fear of death. Biopolitics and necropolitics are thus two sides of the same coin. Power still decides over death, but in a far more masked and sophisticated form.

The Politicization of Grief and the Hierarchy of Lives

How does necropower operate with the legitimacy of letting someone suffer, or even killing them outright? What strategies does it apply to neutralize grief? Foucault saw racism as the primary mitigating reason for killing others. Racism works with a hierarchy of races and employs various stereotypes attached to particular races, thereby enabling one being to feel superior to another, allowing one race to be protected while the other is exterminated. Mbembe agrees with Foucault but further develops this idea, pointing out that necropolitics does not work only with racism, but also with religion, ethnicity, gender, or class – Mbembe's necropolitics is further de-

veloped, for example, in the book *Queer Necropolitics*. These categories abused by power divide humanity into "us vs. them," creating fear that "the others" threaten our life – though it need not be only life, but anything we value. Fiala, for example, speaking entirely in the diction of Orientalism at a debate in Olomouc, claimed that Israel is our ally that must be protected because it is the only democratic country in the Middle East, and that removing dangerous elements is therefore also in our own interest. This creates the old familiar story of danger posed by barbaric peoples and tribes seeking to undermine advanced civilization. Over time, this inevitably leads to the dehumanization of the second category, whose primary characteristic is a threat to our life or civilization. Other attributed characteristics include parasitism, barbarism, lack of culture, primitiveness, instinctiveness, abnormality, and so on. We need not look far afield; we can recall the refugee crisis and the dramas it has provoked – and continues to provoke – in public media, where migrants are regarded as second-class beings. Islam and migration remain important topics in Europe today, not only for populist parties. At present, one can observe the processes and deportations carried out by the Trump administration in the USA, or again Israel, whose government representatives openly speak of ethnic cleansing and the dehumanization of the Palestinian population, referring to them as animals. This division into "us vs. them" is further characterized in Israel by an apartheid regime. By reducing human lives to what Mbembe would call bare lives – lives that bring us nothing but threat – their loss does not evoke strong grief, since the loss of such lives is considered necessary for survival.

To prevent threat, these bare lives are concentrated in a single place under strict control. Necropolitics creates death-worlds, inhabited by the living dead, whose death is not worthy of mourning. This is similar to what Agamben develops in his thesis of *homo sacer*, a life that can be ended without being perceived as murder. In these death-worlds, a peculiar state prevails in which life is not fully life, yet not fully death; the boundaries between life and death are blurred. People in these death-worlds persist in a constant state of threat. They are not immediately killed, but are continually exposed to conditions in which their life becomes a life-toward-death – slow dying, survival in inhuman conditions without hope or prospects for improvement and dignity. Death is normalized here as a daily possibility, whether physical or social, in which the individual does not exist for surrounding society, is invisible, and has no voice. Necropolitics does not merely allow someone to be killed without consequences; it also allows for the creation of an unlivable life – a life not worth living, a life we do not consider a full life at all. A typical example is the current situation in Gaza, where humanitarian aid is blocked and famine in the area is a political tool of the Israeli government. People surviving in Gaza are exposed to death every day and live in a permanent crisis, while their deaths until recently did not provoke stronger reactions among a significant part of the population.

Not only death, but also grief, is a political matter in this case. Both Israeli and Palestinian populations mourn. An excellent publication dealing with grief over lost lives is *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* by Judith Butler. In it, she examines the function of politics and media and points to power-produced frames that allow us to understand the loss of one life as grievable, while the loss of another is not. Simply put – if a life is close to us and meets certain produced criteria, it is worthy of mourning because we understand it as a full life; if a life does not meet the criteria of what we consider life, we care little about its loss. How the lives of others are portrayed to us is determined by the media we consume daily. They convey an image of reality, but this image is framed – something is emphasized, something omitted, something well-formulated – meaning that frames are not neutral and have the power to determine what we consider violence,

defense, a terrorist act, and so on. Sadness, grief, and compassion are thus not distributed evenly in society, and this selectivity serves to maintain the legitimacy of asymmetric violence and war.

I return again to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In the context of Czech media, it is important to observe subtle nuances in language use. First, it must be emphasized that not every report has identical features of the kind discussed below, and much depends on the authorship of a given text. However, that uneven reporting occurred is suggested by Jan Motal, who together with other analysts in 2024 submitted an analysis – requested by the Czech Television Council – regarding the balance of reporting on events in Gaza, with the conclusion indicating that Czech Television reported in an unbalanced manner.[1] The text demonstrates binarity, a certain "us vs. them" thinking, where the Palestinian population of Gaza was linguistically and visually depicted as chaotic and dangerous, while Israeli representatives were portrayed as organized, efficient, and confident.

Czech Television is not the only medium to have produced uneven narratives. Worth mentioning is, for example, the following excerpt from Novinky.cz: "The war in the Gaza Strip has so far claimed tens of thousands of lives, according to Palestinian authorities controlled by Hamas. Mostly civilians are also dying on the ground due to a lack of food, as the Strip is cut off from access to humanitarian aid. The war in the Gaza Strip has caused a massive humanitarian catastrophe. An outbreak of famine is expected."[2] Let us note one crucial thing here: Israel does not appear even once in the role of an active agent. The massive humanitarian catastrophe was caused by "the war in the Gaza Strip," people are dying due to lack of food because the Strip "is cut off from access to humanitarian aid." The problem here is the omission of the active agent that actually caused the humanitarian catastrophe: not the war, but Israel caused the humanitarian catastrophe, because it blocks humanitarian aid, it truly cut Gaza off from the rest of the world, and because of this, arrest warrants have been issued by the International Criminal Court against some Israeli representatives for war crimes. In Czech syntax, this is a derived diathesis, in which the semantic subject (the agent of the action) is pushed out of its surface formal level. This linguistically allows responsibility to be obscured and neutralized. For simpler understanding, I will give an example we all know from childhood: "It broke. It did that by itself. I'm not responsible for anything."

Here is another example, this time from iRozhlas.cz: "Israeli airstrikes on several locations in the Gaza Strip claimed at least ten lives on Thursday, reports AFP citing local civil defense. (…) In recent days, several incidents occurred in their vicinity in which dozens of people died. (…) The worst of the bloody incidents near these centers claimed 31 lives in Rafah on Sunday and nearly 200 people were injured. Its investigation was also demanded by UN Secretary-General António Guterres. (…) Israel launched a military offensive in the Gaza Strip in October 2023 in response to a terrorist attack by Hamas, during which militants in southern Israel killed about 1,200 people and abducted another 251. (…) As a result of the fighting, at least 54,470 Palestinians have lost their lives in Gaza and about 124,700 others have been injured."[3] The excerpts come from a single report. What stands out here are the verbs associated with each side. The Palestinian population "loses lives," "dies," and the fighting "claims the dead," even though, according to eyewitnesses – and the report itself states this – the Israeli army fired at civilians. The passive

[1] See: https://img.ceskatelevize.cz/press/7079.pdf [accessed 12 June 2025].

[2] See: https://www.novinky.cz/tag/valka-v-izraeli-96172 [accessed 12 June 2025].

[3] See: https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-svet/izraelska-armada-pokracuje-s-bombardovanim-pasma-gazy-nalety-si-vyzadaly-nejmene_2506050826_kvr [accessed 14 June 2025].

construction “lost their lives” is also striking, once again removing responsibility and presenting death as an inevitable part of fighting. By contrast, Hamas quite unequivocally “kills.” While Palestinian people die, perish, or lose their lives, Israeli people are killed and murdered by Hamas, and thus the two lives acquire different meanings, since the verbs “to kill” and “to murder” evoke different connotations than “to perish” or “to lose one’s life” – in the former case, they contain a moral judgment regarding the just or unjust ending of another’s life, while in the latter case they represent a neutral description, a dry statement of fact that does not provoke questions of justice.

This question of justice and injustice can be seen in the following addendum, which appears in the vast majority of Czech reports on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: “The war was provoked by a terrorist attack by Hamas and other radical groups on October 7, during which Palestinian militants killed nearly 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducted about 250 others to the Gaza Strip as hostages. In retaliation, Israel launched a massive offensive, during which, according to the Hamas-controlled Ministry of Health, more than 37,000 Palestinians have lost their lives in the Gaza Strip. The figures cannot be independently verified.”[4] This short excerpt again demonstrates the division of lives into two opposing categories: Palestinian militants “killed” the Israeli population, but as a result of Israeli retaliation, 37,000 Palestinians “lost their lives.” Hamas killed civilians, and Israel therefore – logically and justly – launched retaliation, during which it does not kill civilians (which would raise the question of retaliation from the other side), but Palestinians “merely” lose their lives. Note also a small detail: while in the case of Israel it is emphasized that the 1,200 people killed by Hamas were mostly civilians, no such mention appears regarding Palestinian deaths, again creating an uneven image. Furthermore, black-and-white framing is promoted, as the report claims that the war was provoked by a Hamas terrorist attack, which is true and utterly condemnable, but it does not take into account or even recall the problematic history of the region and the apartheid regime prevailing in Israel, thus contributing to a black-and-white, binary worldview of good and evil. Fortunately, a slow reassessment and gradual self-reflection are now occurring in Czech discourse.

How to Fight Necropolitics?

In conclusion, I return to the words of Petr Fiala. In this sense, Fiala’s words do not represent merely an unfortunate political gesture, but a symptom of a broader framework within which Czech public discourse operates – a framework that determines whose suffering is visible and whose remains hidden, whose death is considered regrettable and whose is accepted as a “necessary consequence.” Ultimately, the logic of necropolitics is once again confirmed, in which power decides on the value of life and death based on hierarchical categories of identity, power, and alliance. Czech politics thereby assumes co-responsibility for reproducing a world order in which some people are pushed to the periphery of humanity, while others remain bearers of the full right to life. All the more urgent, then, is the need to insist that Czech society restore its capacity to see suffering in its universality and thereby challenge the structures that enable the selective production of death. At the same time, I do not conceal that similar mechanisms may operate on the opposing side, for example on the side of Hamas; however, given the limitations of scope and

[4] See: https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-svet/v-rafahu-zabila-ukryta-naloz-ctyri-izraelske-vojaky-dalsich-sedm-utrpelo-zraneni_2406111115_adn [accessed 14 June 2025].

also due to the current pro-Israeli discourse, I have decided to focus exclusively on an analysis of the Israeli side.

But how can these structures be fought? Necropolitical strategies can awaken feelings of despair and intense deprivation among activists, especially when communicating with a person fully ensnared in the web of necropolitics. I believe that the best form of resistance against the categorization of lives and death is the humanization of the other side – precisely what necropolitics removes: giving voice to people pushed to the margins, actively listening to these voices, and conveying their experiences and stories to the wider world.

In this regard, I was particularly struck by the publications *Jestli mám zemřít, ať je to příběh (*If I Must Die, Let It Be a Story) and *Na této zemi je pro co žít* (*There Is Something Worth Living for on This Land)*, which open space in the media environment for voices and stories that are strongly ignored. A commendable book dealing with refugees is *Do hranice čisto*, which, in accessible, readable, and comprehensible language, conveys the life stories of migrants from Congo, Afghanistan, and Syria. Their experiences portray migrants in an unconventional light and restore equal status to lives often dehumanized in the public sphere. The violence committed by some individuals in refugee camps is also contextualized and humanized in a way that any of us can understand, while simultaneously pointing to the systemic problems of these camps.

Humanizing the other side through stories allows us to draw closer to another human being, portraying life in its diversity and making it more understandable. The loss of such a familiar life, no longer a mere abstract category or number in a summary, can begin to evoke sorrow in people – a driving force for ending the legitimation of violence against others. This is why I hope that more books, films, or documentaries will emerge in the future that pass the metaphorical microphone to marginalized groups. To perceive others as full human beings is a small step toward further mobilization against injustice.

Lejnad Hnát
Privatization and Categorization of Death
An Essay on Necropolitics and the Legitimation of Violence in the Contemporary World
4.8.2025

https://www.afed.cz/text/8478/privatizace-a-kategorizace-smrti

theanarchistlibrary.org