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THE CONCEPTS OF BIOPOLITICS AND NECROPOLITICS IN THE PHILOSOPHICAL FRAMEWORK OF FOUCAULT AND MBEMBE AS REFERENCES IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF INTERCULTURALITY

Los conceptos de biopolítica y necropolítica en los postulados filosóficos de Foucault y Mbembe como referentes en la construcción de la interculturalidad

Research Article

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the categories of biopolitics and necropolitics within the philosophical tenets of Michel Foucault (2006) and Achille Mbembe (2011) through a qualitative research paradigm. Both philosophers belong to the contemporary period, yet to different geospatial contexts: the former was born in Europe, and the latter in Africa. However, Mbembe's theoretical framework is partially constructed by drawing upon Foucauldian philosophical approaches. On this basis, the study seeks to identify the strengths and limitations that may arise in articulating an intercultural project capable of confronting biopolitics (the management of life) and necropolitics (the governance of death), a field that is undoubtedly not harmonious but rather contested. The methodology employed is grounded in the examination of both primary and secondary sources related to Foucauldian biopolitics and Mbembian necropolitics. The research method used is hermeneutic, due to the historical-philosophical interpretation of biopolitical and necropolitical texts. The main conclusions suggest that: (a) biopolitics administers, safeguards, and multiplies human life; (b) necropolitics manages human death and destroys cultures, epistemes, and entire peoples by rendering them expendable; (c) the exercise of both biopolitics and necropolitics is never absolute or unbreakable, as it always contains lines of escape that may benefit affected populations; and (d) interculturality not only promotes respectful and symmetrical dialogue among cultures, human beings, and epistemes, but also extends this relationship to nature itself, recognizing it as a mother.

Keywords

Biopolitics; Foucault; Interculturality; Mbembe; Necropolitics; Politics.

Resumen

El texto se propone analizar las categorías biopolítica y necropolítica en los postulados filosóficos de Michel Foucault (2006) y Achille Mbembe (2011) mediante el "paradigma cualitativo". Ambos filósofos pertenecieron a la época contemporánea, pero a lugares geoespaciales diferentes; el primero, nació en Europa; el segundo, en África, aunque, en parte, Mbembe construye su cartografía teórica alimentándose de los planteamientos filosóficos foucaultianos. Sobre estas bases, se plantea identificar las bondades y limitaciones que pudieran existir en cuanto a la articulación de un proyecto intercultural para ponerse frente a la biopolítica (gestión de la vida) y necropolítica (gobierno de la muerte), que, de seguro, no es un campo pacífico sino disputado. La metodología esgrimida parte de la investigación de las fuentes primarias y secundarias respecto al concepto biopolítico foucaultiano y necropolítico mbembiano. El método de investigación utilizado fue el hermenéutico, debido a la interpretación histórico-filosófica de los textos biopolíticos y necropolíticos. Las conclusiones relevantes sugieren: (a) la biopolítica administra, cuida y multiplica la vida de las personas; (b) la necropolítica gestiona la muerte humana, destruye culturas, epistemes y pueblos enteros, considerándolos superfluos; (c) se piensa que el ejercicio de la biopolítica y de la necropolítica nunca es inquebrantable, siempre tiene líneas de fuga para el beneficio de las poblaciones afectadas; (d) la interculturalidad no solo propone un diálogo respetuoso y simétrico entre las culturas, seres humanos y epistemes, sino con la misma naturaleza, considerando a esta como su madre.

Palabras clave:

Biopolítica, Foucault, Interculturalidad, Mbembe, Necropolítica, Política.

Introduction

This text offers a theoretical and historical overview—albeit tangential—of the origins, conceptualizations, and debates surrounding the category of biopolitics, as well as the ways in which this category has gained analytical fertility within the fields of education and the social and human sciences, becoming a “toolbox” (Foucault, 2012). From this perspective, it is argued that the concept of biopolitics is not univocal; rather, it is characterized by its polysemic, heterogeneous, and controversial nature. Foucault (2003) introduced the term for the first time “through lectures delivered at various institutions in Rio de Janeiro in October 1974” (López, 2012, p. 236), specifically “in the social medicine course at the State University of Rio de Janeiro” (Cortés, 2014, p. 204), and in several of his lectures at the Collège de France between 1977 and 1979, whose central thesis consists in administering human life as a species.

On the other hand, the Cameroonian philosopher Mbembe (2011) is credited with coining and developing the category of necropolitics in 2003, building upon the Foucauldian concept of biopolitics to analyze the ways in which governments determine “who may live and who must die” (p. 19), as well as how people will live and how they will die (Estévez, 2015). Mbembe (2011) understands necropolitics as the manner in which modern sovereignty institutionalizes death and makes it its primary practice.

This article is structured around a general objective: to analyze the concepts of biopolitics and necropolitics in the philosophical tenets of Foucault (2006) and Mbembe (2011) as reference frameworks in the construction of interculturality. From this general objective, three specific objectives are developed: (a) to analyze the concept of biopolitics within Foucault’s philosophical framework (2012); (b) to examine the concept of necropolitics in Mbembe’s philosophical thought (2011); and (c) to identify the strengths and limitations of the intercultural project in relation to biopolitics and necropolitics within a field of ongoing contestation.

The methodology employed in this study is based on the examination of primary and secondary sources related to the concept of biopolitics in Foucault (2012) and necropolitics in Mbembe (2011). The research method used is hermeneutic, aimed at achieving a historical-philosophical interpretation of the authors under consideration.

The article is organized into three sections. The first presents an approach to and conceptual understanding of biopolitics as developed by Foucault (2006, 2012). The central thesis of biopolitics lies in administering life or managing an entire population in motion through technologies of domination. The second section offers a brief analytical overview of the concept of necropolitics in Mbembe's philosophical thought, a category referring to the power to dictate death. The third reflects on how the intercultural project is reconfigured within spaces of resistance and insurgency—political, educational, and epistemic—vis-à-vis the bio- and necro-political machinery of power.

The Concept of Biopolitics in Michel Foucault

The biopolitical paradigm has, at present, attained central importance in the field of research, as it has become a key topic for understanding the contemporary world. Understanding biopolitics entails addressing the following questions: What does the concept of biopolitics mean, and when did it emerge? “How was it configured as such, and what aporias does it still carry within itself?” (Esposito, 2006, p. 16).

In this context, etymologically, the term biopolitics is composed of the prefix “bio,” derived from the Greek word *bios* (life), and the semanteme “politics,” also from the Greek *polis* (Inostroza, 2015). Biopolitics refers to the relationship between life and politics, or to the way life is treated or studied by and within politics. From a structural perspective, Esposito (2006) notes that Foucault did not coin the term; however, his work re-signified the entire spirit of political philosophy and other areas of knowledge.

According to Benente (2009), the philosopher Rudolf Kjellén may have been the first to use the term biopolitics. Similarly, Lemke (2017) argues that the “Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén may have been the first to employ it” (p. 21). Nevertheless, the paradigm gained prominence and importance in Foucault’s work (2012). Even so, Foucault underscores the need to examine liberalism before undertaking an analysis of biopolitics. Paradoxically, although the book is titled *The Birth of Biopolitics*, it addresses the category only superficially. While Foucault (2012) himself states that he intended to develop a course specifically on biopolitics, he justifies this limited treatment by arguing that, in order to understand biopolitics, one must first grasp the meaning of the liberal governmental regime.

According to Benente (2009), Esposito (2006) appears to align with the period in which Foucault (2010) situates the origin¹ of biopolitics. For the Italian thinker, traces of biopolitics can already be found indirectly in the work of Hobbes²; however, biopolitical practices intensified during the eighteenth century. In contrast, Cortés (2014) notes that Foucault dates the emergence of biopolitics in a more nuanced manner—first in the mid-eighteenth century, and later in the early nineteenth century:

The term “biopolitics” appears at various points in Foucault’s work. It seems that he first used it in one of the lectures he delivered in a course on social medicine at the State University of Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) in 1974. There, Foucault argued that power is not exercised solely through consciousness or ideology; rather, politics also entails a specific field of intervention in and through the body. (Cortés, 2014, p. 204)

For Benente (2009), it is possible to argue—if such a concept can indeed be identified within Foucault’s work (2012)—that biopolitics was not extensively or systematically developed as a category in his oeuvre. Nevertheless, the work in which Foucault (1976/2014) most directly addressed biopolitics is *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, specifically Chapter 5, entitled “Right of Death and Power over Life.”

¹ In this line of analysis, “while for Foucault and Esposito biopolitics would be a modern phenomenon, for Giorgio Agamben—another contemporary Italian author—it would not originate in modernity, but rather would have always been embedded in Western politics” (Quintana, 2006, pp. 44–45, as cited in Benente, 2009, p. 5).

² Mauro Benente notes: “If one were to provide a very brief reference to the work of Thomas Hobbes, one might turn to the preface of *De Cive*, written in France in 1642. The analysis of the state of nature becomes important, according to Hobbes, because it allows us to understand the rights of states and the duties of subjects” (Hobbes, 2000, p. 43, as cited in Benente, 2009, p. 4).

The Operation of Biopolitics

Ávila-Fuenmayor (2006) argues that power relations within the academic sphere have undergone significant transformations since the late 1970s. For instance, following the decline of Marxism, Foucault (2003) gained a prominent position within the social and human sciences. In particular, the emergence of the categories of *biopolitics* and *biopower* has, in recent years, become increasingly significant in the studies and debates of Latin American political theory and political science, “as well as in the multiplicity of perspectives and approaches that unfold when addressing policies over life in the present” (Grinberg, 2013, p. 9).

The category of biopolitics also becomes relevant when analyzing how contemporary, institutionalized education has undertaken the (re)production of social divisions, hierarchies, and asymmetries related to class, gender, and ethnicity (Cheli, 2013). There exists a classification of children into categories such as healthy and sick, robust and weak, normal and abnormal—often stereotyped and discriminated against. In this way, education, as an institution, produces lives that are functional to capitalism.

The purpose of institutions is to distribute individuals in space and organize them in time, with the outcome expected to exceed the mere sum of individual forces (Deleuze, 2014). Likewise, biopolitics proves useful because it enables us to understand, from multiple angles, how power extends its operation over the lives of populations at all levels: students, parents, bodies of knowledge, teachers, administrative staff, neighborhoods, and Indigenous communities. In contrast, interculturality respects the life of all beings in nature, even going so far as to question biocentrism.

On the other hand, it must first be acknowledged that the understanding of biopolitics is not uniform; rather, it presents itself as a fundamentally polysemic and even controversial concept. In other words, biopolitics constitutes a heterogeneous field that is difficult to subsume under a single perspective (Conno, 2013; Giorgi, 2014). This is not only because the two terms that compose the concept—life and politics—are themselves polysemic and contested, but

also because biopolitics fundamentally brings into relation two lexicons that, within the dominant tradition of European philosophical-political thought, have generally been examined as substantially opposed (Conno, 2013).

One of the philosophers who has most extensively engaged with this category is Roberto Esposito (2006), building upon Foucauldian analyses of biopolitics³, which revolve around a question that, according to him, remains unresolved—or rather admits multiple possible answers: “Why is it that, at least up to now, a politics of life always threatens to turn into an action of death?” (p. 16). Esposito (2006) does not deny the extraordinary analytical strength of Foucault’s work (2010), but he questions the absence of a definitive answer to this question, as if demanding a single valid and universal response—although he himself acknowledges the coexistence of multiple answers to the problem posed by Foucault (2006). In this sense, Esposito (2006) advocates for an affirmative biopolitics, whereas Agamben (1995/2003) advances a thanatopolitical interpretation of biopolitics, evident in totalitarian states and concentration camps, both under fascist and Nazi regimes.

When Agamben (2003) argues that power can become an action of death, this can be understood to mean that power operates through interruptions or pauses in its acts of killing—it is as if power momentarily rests only to resume killing with greater force. In contrast to this thesis, it may be argued that power kills continuously, since its exercise is permanent; its governance over life is ongoing and extends across all the networks it weaves.

In this context, Valverde’s (2015) reflections are particularly relevant, as they suggest that governments do not kill directly through their armies, but rather allow people to die. Children with chronic illnesses, elderly women and men are left to die—an approach that runs counter to the intercultural paradigm. Within this alternative framework, even nature is treated as a living subject. By contrast, biopolitics operates in two directions: on the one hand,

³ For Antonio Negri (2013), Foucault’s book *The Birth of Biopolitics*, based on a course delivered in 1979 at the Collège de France, despite sharing the same title, develops neoliberalism in greater depth, thereby neglecting the category of biopolitics.

regulatory power presents itself as a constructor of life, while simultaneously controlling its contingencies, risks, and deficiencies; on the other hand, it indirectly diminishes life by allowing death to occur.

The question is thus reiterated: What is life for biopolitics in the reflections of Esposito and Foucault? Or, for example, what might the lives of schoolchildren represent within a biopolitical framework? To address this, one turns to the problematizations proposed by Esposito (2006), who, in *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, explains why modern politics—grounded in the protection of *bios*—is also fundamentally a politics of death⁴, that is, a thanatopolitics, insofar as it requires that political power continuously make decisions over life and death. In this framework, one segment of the human species may be selected and eliminated so that another may continue to live. Esposito (2006) further suggests that affirmative biopolitics may constitute a form of politics that is not a power over life, but rather a politics of life itself.

Foucault's (2010) relative silence regarding the question —what concept of life underlies his notion of biopolitics? —was addressed by theorists such as Giorgio Agamben (2003) and Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt (2002). The former introduces the concept of “bare life,” an alternative formulation of biopolitical life, while the latter develops the notion of “productive life,” another conceptualization within the biopolitical framework. From the perspectives of Foucault (2010), Esposito (2006), Agamben (2003), and Negri and Hardt (2002), politics acquires the status of biopolitics; that is, it becomes a mode of governance that statizes *bios* (Pankova, n.d.).

As Cortez (2015) reflects, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt (2002) identify in Nietzsche and Foucault a conceptual continuity that allows for the analysis of the contemporary emergence of biopolitics through an immanent and posthuman temporality. Esposito (2006) himself notes that Nietzsche's notion of *bios* lends particular depth to biopolitical analysis.

⁴ When modern politics becomes a politics of death, it is thanatopolitics (eugenics, genocide, racism), whereas modern politics grounded in the care of life is, from a biopolitical perspective, oriented toward the preservation of life.

Furthermore, “all the literature on Nietzsche has consistently emphasized the vital element: life as the only possible representation of being. Yet what holds evident ontological relevance must also be interpreted in political terms” (Esposito, 2006, p. 129). For this thinker, life has always been political, understood as the original mode in which the living exists or in which being lives: “Nietzsche conceives the political dimension of *bios* not as the character, law, or destiny of something that exists prior to life, but as the power that from the outset shapes life in all its extension, constitution, and intensity” (Esposito, 2006, p. 130). Although for Nietzsche (2016) life is the will to power, from Esposito’s perspective this does not imply that life requires power, nor that power captures and develops a purely biological life; rather, life knows no mode of being other than that of continuous intensification.

The term *bios* has also inspired the emergence of other debates. For instance, Negri (2013), during his visit in 2012 to the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO) in Ecuador to deliver a series of seminars and lectures, addressed the concept of biocapitalism, which fundamentally carries two meanings:

The first refers to an industrial capitalism applied to the development of the biological sciences in general. The second refers to a form of capitalism that, in its process of valorization (that is, profit-making), has already incorporated the entirety of society. (p. 20)

This even extends to the domination and subordination of Pachamama (Mother Nature).

In this sense, biocapitalism appropriates all life. It becomes the owner and master of life, with the authority to make decisions about life and over life itself. Put differently, drawing on the reflections of Negri and Hardt (2002) in one section of *Empire*, biopower expands under the guise of humanitarian organizations: pacifist groups, Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders), Amnesty International. These non-governmental organizations (NGOs) extend their reach across the entire scope of biopower; they function as the capillaries of contemporary networks of power or, to return to the broader metaphor, as the wide base of the triangle of global power. For Negri

and Hardt (2002), the actions of NGOs align with the operations of the Empire “beyond politics,” within the terrain of biopower, thereby addressing the needs of life itself.

Within this framework, it becomes especially relevant for this section to raise the following theoretical questions: Can biopolitics and biopower, as a theoretical horizon, constitute a “toolbox” for thinking about contemporary education, interculturality, knowledge, and our social reality, despite their polysemic and controversial conceptualizations? Put differently, is it possible to establish an intersection between interculturality and the Foucauldian conceptual cartography? These questions will be addressed in the following sections; however, prior to that, the concept of necropolitics, as developed by Mbembe (2011, 2016), will be examined.

The Concept of Necropolitics in Achille Mbembe

The Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe (2011) coins and develops the concept of necropolitics to analyze “the hypothesis that the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and capacity to determine who may live and who must die” (Mbembe, 2011, p. 19), as well as how individuals are to live and how they are to die. For Mbembe (2011, 2016), necropolitics is intrinsically linked to politics and death. In this vein, Rodríguez (2017) argues that “politics is therefore death that constantly threatens human life; that is, life is placed in jeopardy by the threat of annihilation, by being subjected to death” (p. 150). For Mbembe (2012), the term necropolitics essentially encompasses three aspects:

First, the contexts in which the state of exception has become the rule; second, the technologies of power directed toward populations deemed superfluous or disposable, materially destroying their bodies; and third, those configurations in which power or government continuously appeals to emergency and to a fictionalized or phantom-like notion of the enemy—such that, under the premise of being threatened, one may indiscriminately kill those judged to be enemies. (p. 136)

Mbembe (2012) understands necropolitics as the form of modern sovereignty that institutionalizes death and makes it its defining practice. According to Rodríguez (2017), human beings within necropolitical zones are treated as objects of buying and selling, governed by economic calculations; in other words, their life and death acquire surplus value depending on the decisions of those in power. This is where necro-economics operates. In the reflections of Montag (2005), it can be argued that within necroeconomics, the market demands that death be enabled and legitimized by sovereign power, as well as by those who are destined to die due to their condition of poverty.

Similarly, Valverde (2015), drawing on Mbembe's (2011) concept of *necropower*, emphasizes that, within necropolitics, life becomes an object of calculation, whereby those deemed unprofitable are left to die: dependents, chronically ill individuals, the elderly, and the homeless—who are often blamed for their own condition. In this sense, the excluded are rendered “dead while alive.” In line with this argument, Nogales (2020) contends that “capitalism is always an economy and has existed both in times of sovereignty and in those of biopower and necropower” (p. 2006); however, Nogales (2020) underscores that in contemporary society the function of death within the economy has intensified: “Never before has death occupied such a prominent place in society as a whole” (p. 2006). “It can also be understood as a death-in-life, because, being constantly threatened with annihilation or placed in a condition of abandonment, human beings, despite being alive, become ‘living dead’ (zombies), a paradoxical expression” (Rodríguez, 2017, p. 150).

Valverde (2015) further stresses that bodies deemed useless to the system—those that neither produce nor consume—are left to die. Likewise, for Nogales (2020), life and death become commodities when individuals, in exchange for money or other goods, place themselves at the disposal of those who wish for someone else's death. At this point, it is important to emphasize that Achille Mbembe (2011), as a careful reader of Franz Fanon (2011, 2018), intertwines the category of *necropower* with racism, arguing that radical racism seeks to exterminate and annihilate humanity without necessarily committing murder, or alternatively, to treat certain human groups as slaves deemed inferior:

The condition of the slave is therefore the result of a triple loss: loss of a “home,” loss of rights over one’s body, and loss of political status. This triple loss amounts to absolute domination, an alienation from birth, and a social death (which is an expulsion from humanity). (pp. 31–32)

The theoretical cartography of necropower is further elaborated by Mbembe (2011) in *Necropolitics. On Private Indirect Government*. In this work, biopolitics proves insufficient for understanding how life is subjected to the power of death in the African context. Whereas Foucauldian biopolitics is characterized by the power to “make live and let die,” Mbembenian necropower is defined by the power to dictate death more directly and expansively. Following this line of analysis, it can be argued that Foucauldian biopolitics is incomplete and insufficient for understanding contemporary and Latin American realities. For Mbembe (2011), the limitations of biopower were evident; only necropower could adequately explain contemporary forms of domination. In this regard, he states:

I have attempted to demonstrate that the notion of biopower is insufficient to account for contemporary forms of the subjugation of life to the power of death. I have also employed the notions of the politics of death and the power of death to account for the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed with the aim of maximizing the destruction of persons and creating death-worlds—new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead. (pp. 74–75)

Within necropolitics, individuals function as “living dead,” whereas within biopolitics they operate as subjects who ostensibly possess freedoms and rights, where life is supposedly maximized (Rodríguez, 2017). As Estévez (2015) puts it:

For theorists of biopolitics, it constitutes a fundamental starting point for analyzing relations of domination; however, in the context of the Global South, it proves insufficient, because the dispositifs, techniques, practices, and strategies involved in relations of domination produce far more radical effects. (p. 144)

As evidenced by the effects of wars against drug trafficking, organized crime, and mass deaths in Ecuadorian prisons, for example, these cases demonstrate that it is not only life that is administered (biopolitics), but also death (necropolitics). There is neither opposition nor rupture between necropolitics and biopolitics; rather, they operate relationally. According to Gigena's (2020) interpretation, Mbembe (2016) argues that in global modernity (our present), disciplinary, biopolitical, and necropolitical forms are articulated in a way capable of achieving "absolute" domination over certain populations, much as occurred during the colonial period with enslaved peoples. A concrete example can be observed, as Morena (2022) notes:

Throughout 2021, Ecuador experienced the worst prison crisis in its history. During the months of February, July, September, and November, four massacres took place in different correctional facilities across the country, resulting in the deaths of approximately 250 inmates, carried out with inhuman brutality. (para. 1)

This situation suggests that in Ecuador and in so-called "developing" countries, necropolitics prevails over biopolitics, serving as an indicator of the presence of a politics of death rather than a politics of life, as understood by Foucault (Mbembe, 2011). However, this does not imply that biopolitics and necropolitics are opposed; rather, they operate simultaneously. One key point to emphasize is that:

Various theorists from Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe have highlighted that biopolitics does not function uniformly across contexts and is insufficient to explain the objectives of power relations in the Global South, where both criminal violence and state violence reveal that the aim is not the regulation of life but of death. (Estévez, 2015, p. 144)

In other words, Mbembe (2011) does not dismiss the importance of disciplinary and biopolitical forms of power; rather, he argues that they are insufficient for analyzing the exercise of power across all geographic and geopolitical contexts.

According to Estévez (2018), the African philosopher emphasizes that the proliferation of weapons and the existence of "death-worlds"—zones in which subjects are so marginalized that they effectively live as the living dead—serve

as evidence of a politics of death rather than a politics of life, as articulated by Foucault. However, this interpretation by Estévez (2018) appears incomplete, insofar as Mbembe (2011) does not posit a rupture or discontinuity between biopolitics and necropolitics; on the contrary, he identifies an interrelation and continuity between the forms of power theorized by Foucault and Mbembe's own concept of necropolitics.

Furthermore, Mbembe (2011) goes even further in developing the articulation of different forms of power when he asserts that, under the apartheid regime—a particular form of terror—biopower (Foucault, 2014), the state of exception, and the state of siege (Schmitt, 1994) are interwoven. Power becomes formidable and terrifying precisely through this combination of power modalities.

Mbembe's notion of necropolitics, bearing Foucauldian traces and legacies, proposes to conceptualize sovereignty as the power to dictate life and death exercised by African leaders over their populations. Similarly, Valenzuela (2019), with whom this perspective aligns, argues that Mbembe (2016) reactivates Foucault's (2002) conception of biopower and biopolitics, highlighting the control exerted by power over the domain of life. "His proposal of necropolitics incorporates concepts such as the politics of death and the power of death, in which weapons function as instruments of maximal destruction, creating death-worlds" (p. 100).

Both authors emphasize Mbembe's (2016) theoretical grounding in Foucault's (2012) concept of biopolitics. For his part, Schwarz (2015) contends that, in the Global South, both biopolitics and necropolitics function as strategies within the same apparatus. In this sense, necropolitics "refers to the power to inflict death through technologies of exploitation and bodily destruction such as massacres, femicide, executions, slavery, and sexual trafficking" (Estévez, 2018, p. 10), as well as kidnappings and enforced disappearances.

In summary, biopolitics administers life, whereas necropolitics administers death. However, based on these shared reflections, Estévez (2018) proposes, as a hypothesis, that these are neither separate nor isolated categories, but rather

constitutive of one another—that is, they are mutually co-constructed. Mbembe (2011) himself, drawing on the Palestinian case, argues that “late modern colonial occupation represents an entanglement of multiple forms of power: disciplinary, biopolitical, and necropolitical. The combination of these three enables colonial power to exercise absolute domination over the inhabitants of the occupied territory” (p. 52). Within this framework of connection and interaction, Quiñones (2023) asserts that “since 2006, governance has operated through states of exception, applying necropolitics and necroeconomics within the necrocolony—the colony of death” (p. 207).

It is therefore not possible to deny the interrelation between biopolitics and necropolitics simply because the latter emerged in contrast to the former. Biopolitics is not only a Eurocentric—or more specifically, Francocentric—concept, but it also proves limited in explaining the exercise of power across diverse contexts, as it does not operate uniformly everywhere. From this standpoint, Valenzuela (2019) notes that the concept of necropolitics has gained particular relevance in recent years,

where sovereignty is ultimately understood as the possession of the power to decide who may live and who must die. To make die or to let live thus becomes the central condition of sovereignty, defined as the right to kill. (p. 99)

According to Valverde (2015), necropolitics is a form of politics grounded in the notion that, for power, some lives have value while others do not. Etymologically,

necropolitics (from the Greek *nekro*, death), within neoliberalism, does not require weapons to kill those who are excluded. Through its policies, the excluded live as the living dead or are allowed to die because they are not profitable. They are not even useful as slaves. (pp. 15–16)

In light of this reality, what conceptual or theoretical framework can guide resistance? Is the intercultural project capable of countering biopolitical and necropolitical operations? These and other questions will be addressed in the following section.

Interculturality as an Alternative to Biopolitics and Necropolitics

It is important to begin with several definitions of interculturality understood in dynamic and context-sensitive terms. As a discourse, interculturality has gained strength in the Latin American context, particularly in Andean countries, where it has functioned as a driving force for ethnic reindications in response to biopolitics and necropolitics. Krainer (2023) emphasizes that the intercultural project gained prominence in the 1990s as a concept, a collective practice, and a social project aimed at the (re)vitalization of cultural diversity.

In this sense, the intercultural paradigm continues to be “a source of inspiration and, at the same time, a vehicle for articulating contextual critiques of the dominant culture; critiques that must, in turn, be formulated by considering a dual dimension” (Fornet-Betancourt, 2006, p. 19),

that is, on the one hand, they must constitute a critique of what dominates or is imposed through the domination of the dominant culture—such as homogenizing thought, individualism, the commodification of human relations, consumerism, the erasure of memory, as well as the means and instruments through which dominance expands—information systems, advertising, the entertainment industry, fashion, among others. On the other hand, they must also be articulated as expressions that give voice to what is (supposedly) dominated by the dominant culture, that is, they must serve as spokespersons for all that the domination of the dominant culture oppresses, marginalizes, or violates. (Fornet-Betancourt, 2006, p. 19)

Interculturality must be understood simultaneously as a concept, a collective and individual practice, and a project of society (Torres, 2010; Walsh, 2009). It constitutes both a theory and a practice of relationships. “In striving for human coexistence, interculturality is the art of relating and of making relationships conscious; it is a theory and practice of relationships, and as such, it provides the key to overcoming the obstacle of cultural relativism” (Fornet-Betancourt, 2006, p. 17). From this perspective, interculturality promotes respectful interrelations not only among human beings but among all living entities, whereas biopolitics governs human life in terms of power relations.

For their part, Castro et al. (2016), in addressing the question—what is meant by interculturality?—note a certain consensus that its conceptual construction is diffuse and, at times, ambiguous, to the extent that it may even facilitate the (re)production of biopolitical and necropolitical frameworks. Several fundamental considerations can be derived from this characterization, following Torres (2010) and Fuller (2002): (a) the concept of interculturality is polysemic, taking on different meanings for subordinated cultures than for dominant ones; (b) concepts of interculturality are relative, depending on context, time, and space; (c) the concept depends on the standpoint from which it is formulated and by whom; (d) interculturality is neither static nor universal; and (e) the diversity of definitions demonstrates that interculturality is a complex and broad idea—yet one that remains useful for questioning and resisting biopolitics and necropolitics.

Within this conceptual framework, according to Claros and Viaña (2009), the conservative and dominant notion of interculturality is understood as a respectful dialogue and interaction among diverse groups aimed at harmonious coexistence. Similarly, Briones (2002) defines interculturality as a relationship among equals, rather than one established from a dominant sector toward a subordinate one, in contrast to how power administers life and death.

This definition could be interpreted as a demagogic discourse—projected from loudspeakers or public platforms to elicit mass applause—if it is not accompanied by concrete and observable actions; it may also be understood as a theoretical and political trend. Interculturality, however, should constitute a substantive component of the political culture of participatory democracies in pluricultural contexts such as Ecuador (Tubino, 2002), in order to confront and mitigate the effects of biopolitics and necropolitics.

Intercultural policies seek to address the problems generated by positive discrimination and affirmative action, as well as those issues that such measures fail to resolve. I believe that intercultural approaches still contain significant programmatic gaps that must be clearly identified and rigorously examined. (Tubino, 2002, p. 73)

For the thinkers Claros and Viaña (2009), “interculturality as an aspiration toward a type of social relationship based on respect and dialogue among diverse groups for harmonious coexistence does not exist as a general social phenomenon, nor will it exist” (p. 7), unless the established economic, educational, political, social, and cognitive canons are dismantled. Without transforming these structures, interculturality would exist only in the realm of aspiration and oblivion. Similarly, Fuller (2002) argues that interculturality remains a desire and a blocked utopia, because, in reality, relationships among diverse groups are grounded in injustices and inequalities, particularly in access to material and symbolic resources.

It must also be emphasized that promoting cultural tolerance alone is insufficient to achieve a symmetrical intercultural dialogue; rather, there must be a committed effort—especially on the part of the state and civil society—to foster interculturality. Furthermore, “the intercultural questioning of the current techno-scientific complex aims to provoke a process of reflection within the dominant culture of our contemporary societies” (Fornet-Betancourt, 2001, p. 52). However, in practice, it is often the marginalized who undergo such processes, as if interculturality were solely an issue concerning the poor and excluded.

From Walsh's (2002) perspective, in the Ecuadorian context, interculturality is emerging as a social, political, and epistemological model and proposal driven by Indigenous and Afro-descendant populations. The intercultural must necessarily engage with the economic sphere; otherwise, necroeconomics will continue to operate. Therefore, the intercultural proposal fundamentally entails the establishment of a politics of de-subalternization and decolonization across all domains. It also implies confronting all forms of coloniality, necropower, and biopower. Correspondingly, Alvarado (2002) states that “the construction of an intercultural society entails a political project that enables dialogue among cultures. This dialogue must begin with the recognition of one's own identity and self-esteem” (p. 36).

Based on these reflections, interculturality, on the one hand, can serve—according to the experiences of the authors of this work—as a means for shaping cultural, epistemic, and political insurgencies from subaltern positions; on the other hand, it may also function as a mechanism of neutralization and control within hegemonic culture. In this sense, interculturality is not a peaceful field, but rather one characterized by tension and contestation. In particular, during the period analyzed by Barabas (2006),

Interculturality in Latin America does not, at least for now, correspond to a set of relationships characterized by tolerant and respectful coexistence among diverse ethnic groups (Indigenous peoples), within the framework of policies that effectively promote cultural pluralism. Instead, it refers to a discriminatory, racist, and exploitative form of interculturality that unfolds, at best, within the ideological and political sphere of a pluralism that lacks substantial implementation in terms of legal frameworks and the protection of ethnic rights. (p. 6)

For his part, and within the same analytical context, Albó (2006) emphasizes the necessity of interculturality not only for harmonious coexistence among diverse groups, but also as a means of mutual enrichment.

In the Latin American and Ecuadorian context, interculturality confronts a necropolitical and biopolitical project that destroys ways of life, languages, and entire cultures. More specifically, through school curricula—designed and agreed upon by hegemonic powers—there is an attempt to shape regional, national, and global citizenship characterized by reflective capacity, high competitiveness, discipline, obedience, and political moderation in line with biopolitical logic (Cheli, 2013).

When referring to hegemonic powers, this encompasses the cultural, economic, political, and educational hegemony of the West.

In parallel, according to Lander, the social sciences and humanities taught in most of our universities not only carry the “colonial legacy” of their paradigms but, more critically, contribute to reinforcing the cultural, economic, and political hegemony of the West. (Castro-Gómez, 2007, p. 79)

In this same line of reflection, Fuller (2002), referring to Bolivian⁵ education, acknowledges that the educational system (re)produces (neo)colonial domination and that, in order to address it, curricula must value particular forms of knowledge. Ecuadorian education, at all levels, must become a “toolbox” that contributes to the development of a just, equitable, plurinational, and intercultural society.

Power operates as a machine that has always been driven by the notion that some individuals are worth more than others, in line with necropolitical logic. Those deemed unprofitable can be discarded and excluded from the realm of rights. Interculturality promotes a project referred to as “unity in diversity,” which includes respect for nature, as if it were a mother that gives birth and nurtures life. In contrast, within necropolitics—or the politics of death—the distinction between human beings, objects, and commodities is erased, leaving no one exempt from this process—not women, not Black people, not white people, nor men (Mbembe, 2016).

From the perspective of intercultural projects grounded in Indigenous populations, human beings are not considered disposable or superfluous on a large scale, as necroeconomics proposes (Mbembe, 2016). Neither humanity nor *Pachamama* (Mother Nature) are reduced to objects of economic calculation or statistical evaluation within the intercultural framework. These are fundamental reasons why the encounter between biopower, necropower, and interculturality becomes a constant battlefield marked by significant asymmetries. For instance, the intercultural project lacks access to the machinery of cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 1999), unlike the forms of power analyzed by Foucault (2002, 2010) and Mbembe (2011, 2016).

Extending Mbembe's line of thought, one might also speak of *necroeducation*, understood as an education of death—not because educational institutions are literal concentration camps, nor because teachers or administrative staff “kill” their students, nor because military or police forces enter academic campuses with weapons to cause physical death—but because such systems allow people to die ontologically, epistemologically, and historically, thereby functioning as

⁵ This educational reality in Bolivia is also present in the Ecuadorian context.

a machine of death. Krainer (2023), based on studies of Ecuadorian education, demonstrates that the educational system (re)produces colonial and neocolonial domination, normalizing the coloniality of knowledge. To counter this, education in general must value and preserve orality, ancestral knowledge, and the Andean worldview. Achieving this, in part, requires greater oversight in teacher selection and training, as well as in the organization of curricular content (Briones, 2002).

Drawing on Achille Mbembe (2011), it can be argued that the ultimate discourse of “the epistemic structure lies largely in the power and the capacity to decide which forms of knowledge may live and which must die, which are to be made visible and which are not” (Illicachi & Valtierra, 2018, p. 156). “To make live or let die” (Mbembe, 2011, p. 19) thus constitutes the limits of the triangular canon of coloniality: power, knowledge, and being (Mignolo, 2014). In other words, epistemic sovereignty entails the power and capacity to determine which knowledge survives and which is eliminated. “To make die or to let live therefore constitutes the limits of sovereignty, its principal attributes” (Mbembe, 2011, pp. 19–20).

From a Foucauldian perspective (2010), biopower appears to operate by excluding certain forms of knowledge—those that must “die”—from those that are allowed to “live.” It even seems normalized that global knowledge operates under a logic of survival through disappearance. Its underlying rationale is to eliminate other knowledges (and, by extension, other human subjects) in order to persist; otherwise, it risks its own extinction.

This form of epistemic extermination can be traced back to colonial expansion, but it also persists as a structure that remains in place beyond the colonial period. Mbembe (2011) argues that necropolitics reveals what Foucault’s concept of biopower could not fully capture—namely, new forms of domination, subjugation, and extraction, particularly in the postcolonial African context, although this argument can be extended to broader postcolonial geopolitical scenarios. (Illicachi & Valtierra, 2018, p. 156)

Here, the challenge is to propose interculturality in terms of a dialogical engagement among different rationalities—spaces of encounter between distinct logoi or critical ways of thinking (Fornet-Betancourt, 2006). Interpreting Fornet-Betancourt (2001), it can be argued that the challenge of interculturality lies in thinking through the multiple temporalities that humanity inhabits and produces in its everyday practices and diverse ways of living, as opposed to focusing exclusively on the “dominant spirit” of a given era. While biopolitics and necropolitics entail death, a singular worldview, and the control and disciplining of life, interculturality presents itself as both a theory and a practice of possibilities for life—not only human life, but also that of Pachamama (Mother Nature).

Thus, interculturality disrupts the monologue of dominant culture, enabling spaces for those who have been silenced and rendered invisible (Fornet-Betancourt, 2006). Beyond the risks and potential distortions arising from its manipulation, the essence of interculturality is a call for life and for the flourishing of all beings on the planet. The intercultural field must therefore be understood as a continuous space of both play and struggle.

Conclusions

The analysis confirms the relevance and utility of the conceptual cartographies of biopower, biopolitics, and necropolitics within the social and human sciences. Biopolitics constitutes a heterogeneous and polysemic field, one that is difficult to subsume under a single perspective. Regarding the disputed origins of the category of biopolitics, Esposito (2006) attributes it to the Swedish thinker Kjellén (1920); however, the concept was further developed by Foucault (2014). Negri and Hardt (2002) and Esposito (2006) agree in situating the emergence of biopolitics in the eighteenth century, although Esposito (2006) also identifies implicit references to biopolitics in Hobbes (2005), with its full development intensifying during that same eighteenth century.

Achille Mbembe (2011) is the philosopher who coins and develops the necropolitical paradigm to analyze the ways in which power determines “who may live and who must die” (p. 19), that is, the capacity to “make die and let live” (p. 19). Mbembe (2011) understands necropolitics as the form through which modern governance institutionalizes death and makes it its defining practice. Within necropolitical zones, individuals are treated as objects of exchange, managed according to economic calculations; in other words, their life and death acquire surplus value depending on governmental decisions.

As a discourse, interculturality has gained significant traction in the Latin American context, particularly in Andean countries, where it has functioned as a catalyst for ethnic reindications in response to biopolitics and necropolitics; for instance, in Ecuador, several Indigenous uprisings have taken place. Krainer (2023) emphasizes that interculturality emerged forcefully in the 1990s as a concept, a collective practice, and a social proposal aimed at (re)vitalizing cultural diversity. In working toward human coexistence, interculturality can be understood as the art of relating and making relationships conscious.

However, interculturality, as a project aimed at establishing a form of social relationship based on respect and dialogue among diverse groups for harmonious coexistence, does not exist as a general social phenomenon—nor will it—unless the necroeconomic, educational, political, social, and cognitive structures imposed by power are critically challenged. Moreover, it must be emphasized that promoting cultural tolerance alone, in a multicultural sense, is insufficient to achieve symmetrical intercultural dialogue. What is required is a committed effort—particularly from the state and civil society—to advance interculturality, even though it may be argued that the bourgeois state, entrenched globally, is unlikely to promote or tolerate such transformations, as they directly challenge the mechanisms through which it sustains its hegemony.

Author Contributions Statement

Juan Illicachi Guzñay, Principal Investigator, was responsible for conceptualization, writing, and final revision of the article. Pedro Antonio Carretero Poblete, Co-investigator, contributed to conceptualization and writing. Rómulo Arteño Ramos, Co-investigator, contributed to conceptualization and writing.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with any institution or organization of any kind. Likewise, the Universidad Católica Luis Amigó (University institution) assumes no responsibility for the management of copyright by the authors in their articles; therefore, the accuracy and completeness of citations and references are the sole responsibility of the authors.

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