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The productivity of necropolitics

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Abstract. The following text responds to the ongoing debate on the widespread violence in Latin America, claiming the existence of a necropolitical mode of production that is constituted through an entanglement of expropriation and dual exploitation. This entanglement demonstrates that necropolitics entails an expropriative power that leads to direct exploitation through labouring with expropriated bodies, whose destruction generates the order within which surplus value is extracted. Under necropolitics, the human body becomes one of postcolonial capitalism's last frontiers. In the following, the target of violence – that is, the subject – no longer serves as a bearer of labour power but becomes part of the production process itself in the form of constant capital. Violence turns into necropolitical labour. This shift is significant to analyse in the context of the transitions occurring within capitalism. The article is based on fieldwork conducted in Mexico's postcolonial context and contributes to a materialist analysis of necropolitics.

1 Introduction

At the turn of the 21st century, Latin America underwent transformations that reshaped capitalism: neoliberal reforms in many states, the disappearance of national-level political alternatives, and the rise of new social actors. These shifts have been, and remain, enforced through organized physical violence involving killing, torture, forced displacement, and disappearances. Such violence is simultaneously a means, effect, and condition of societal change. Today, it is driven less by political causes than by a dominant capitalist logic. Above all, violence functions as a power of expropriation for capital – an explanation that will be elaborated upon in this text. In Latin America and the Caribbean, violence has reached unprecedented levels within transnational capitalism. The region holds only 8.2 % of the global population (CEPAL, 2022) but accounts for 34 % of global homicides – making it the deadliest region outside active war zones like Gaza, Sudan, and Ukraine (UNODC, 2023:20 ff.). Spatial inequalities are stark: while Central America long ranked among the most violent areas, Ecuador became the region's deadliest country in just 5 years, with its murder rate rising by 800 % to 44.5 per 100 000 inhabitants (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2024:36). Of the 50 cities worldwide with the highest murder rates (population $> 300\,000$), 37 are in Latin America, 20 in Mexico, and seven of them rank among the global top 10 (Consejo Ciudadano para la Seguridad Pública y la Justicia Penal, 2025:9 f.). In Mexico, 75 % of all killings in 2015 occurred in 203 districts (11.3 % of the country), but by 2024, the same share was concentrated in just 172 districts (7.3 %) (Jasso González, 2025:11). Mexico had over 300 000 murders in the last decade (Jasso González, 2025:13), while disappearances are used to mask killings: by May 2025, Mexico had 128 064 missing persons, 44.3 % from only five of 32 federal states (Mora, 2025; Instituto Mexicano de Derechos Humanos y Democracia, 2025).

The spatial inequality and geographical shift of violence are not only due to the heterogenization and hybridization of sovereign power actors within a national territory but also to the changing strategic importance of routes, zones, commodity chains, and infrastructures for producing, circulating, and selling a wide variety of goods. While drugs are the most well-known example, these sovereign power actors also trade goods such as avocados, petrol, iron ore, and even human beings (Avelar and Martínez, 2023; Dorsch, 2020; Pérez, 2012; Wright, 2011). In general, the violent power relations in Mexico – leading to a homicide rate of 25.6 per 100 000 inhabitants in 2024 (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, 2025:4) – offer a unique perspective on the interconnected effects of space, power, and economics

in Latin America (see e.g. Glockner et al., 2023; Paley, 2014; in the case of the Mexican federal state of Michoacán, see e.g. Juárez Bolaños, 2011; Maldonado, 2010). Today, so-called organized crime is the fifth-largest employer in Mexico. According to the quantitative study by Prieto-Curiel et al. (2023), nearly 175 000 people were employed in this economic sector in 2022 (Prieto-Curiel et al., 2023:1312 ff.). As such studies merely represent snapshots, in direct reference to Prieto-Curiel et al. (2023), "more explicit discussion about what fundamental principles drive cartel size and violence" is necessary (Caulkins et al., 2023:1293).

Global commodity chains – whether raw materials, agricultural products, or drugs, all areas in which hybrid sovereignty reigns in the logic of necropolitics – are characterized in the 21st century by diverse forms of labour relations and, consequently, exploitation. To grasp social reproduction within global capitalism, all labour relations and, by extension, activities involving human beings, must be included in those analyses (Mezzadri, 2025:112). It does not matter what kind of activities they are or how they are paid but how they "are directly crucial to the structuring of processes of labor surplus extraction" (Mezzadri, 2019:38), "directly contributing to value generation" (Mezzadri, 2021:73). Similarly, the exercise of physical violence inflicted on the human body could also be understood as productive if it is analysed *not in isolation* but *structurally embedded* in a commodity-based production process – and thus as part of the reproduction of capitalist relations (Mezzadri, 2019:37; Herb and Uhlmann, 2024:21). I am not interested in violence as an act of brutality. An act of physical violence must be viewed within a social context and linked to structural logics. In this way, violence against individuals can be seen as an attack on society as a whole and, therefore, as something structural (Gago, 2019:66 f.). It is a structured whole with its own logic of power – not an arbitrary process but a strategic one that arises from political and economic structures (Inclán, 2021:43; Beristain, 2022). Violence, including that analysed here, is a precondition for capitalist production. Bodies must be conquered and subjugated – female and queer bodies, as in patriarchy; black and indigenous bodies, as in colonialism; of peasants, as at the beginning of European modernity – so that a new cycle of accumulation can begin (Lazzarato, 2023:9 f.). This text not only refers to this precondition; it also explains how violence is structurally inscribed in the reproduction of postcolonial capitalism.

I seek to contribute to a materialist analysis of necropolitics by proposing that it not only acts as a productive force under postcolonial conditions but also integrates within the logic of capital reproduction. Necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003) represents a contemporary manifestation of sovereignty in previously colonized contexts, where governance rationality reproduces a social order defined by the power to kill its subjects. The concept of necropolitics entails the "generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations" (Mbembe, 2003:14; emphasis in original). Mbembe's analysis parallels Foucault's concept of biopolitics – a mode of governance that nurtures the population and links to the productive non-restrictive aspect of power: a power that "creates life and allows it to die" (Foucault, 2001:223). This "political economy of life" does not reduce to state apparatuses or laws (Lemke, 2008:104), nor does it reside at the centre (Foucault, 1976:114). Foucault aimed to use this lens to reveal the mechanisms of economic exploitation and political domination (Jessop, 2007:40), examining how power relations between subjects foster domination and subjugation (Foucault, 2001:50).

By contrast, Mbembe (2003:24) describes necropolitics as the continuation of colonial rule in postcolonial spaces "where the controls and guarantees of judicial order can be suspended". Here, those who exercise physical violence without legal consequences hold sovereignty. The space itself becomes the "raw material of sovereignty" (Mbembe, 2003:26), while the population living there becomes surplus (for more, see below). Foucault primarily drew on Western European societies for his theories and omitted experiences from other regions (Wright, 2011:709), which "highlights the insufficiency of biopolitics in accounting for the overwhelming presence of death in contemporary global and colonial politics" (Islekel, 2022:2). Thus, the biopolitical concept falls short when applied to contemporary forms of subjugating life in formerly colonized spaces (Mbembe, 2003:39). State and non-state actors exercise necropolitics both independently and together, forming hybrid, opaque, and dynamic sovereignty (Dorsch, 2022). Banerjee (2011:329) argues that Western research generally understands sovereignty as territorially and politically indivisible, often ignoring the colonial experience and its continuities. Flores Pérez (2013) published a genealogical study on how this sovereignty formed in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas.

Apparently, the aim of necropolitics is to produce death (Valencia, 2016:160). However, as we will see below, this sort of production serves the purpose of capital accumulation. In the already mentioned "material destruction of human bodies and populations" (Mbembe, 2003:14; emphasis in original), an economic power of capital acts "to seize life by the roots and entangle it in the logic of valorization" (Mau, 2023:142; emphasis in original). So, what kind of valorization is this, and how is it expressed? To put it bluntly, we cannot understand the violence happening in Latin America without considering the reality of capitalism. In this text, I argue that under the current violent capitalist reality in Latin America, a necropolitical mode of production is constituted through an entanglement of expropriation and dual exploitation. First, organized physical violence expropriates bodies and territories – seizing them without equivalent and demonstrating that necropolitics entails an expropriative power. Second, this expropriation becomes productive through two interconnected forms: indirect exploitation via a second sort of power, this time a disciplining power of necropolitical vi-

olence that pushes entire populations into exploitable labour forces; and direct exploitation through necropolitical labour – the labouring with expropriated bodies whose destruction generates the order within which surplus value is extracted. Under necropolitics, the human body becomes one of postcolonial capitalism's last frontiers. No longer valued solely as a bearer of labour power, or variable capital, the body shifts to raw material for the production process, or constant capital. In short, necropolitics generates economic productivity through the fusion of violent seizure and dual exploitation in spaces governed through physical violence.

Although theoretically oriented, the article draws on empirical evidence from Mexico's Tren Maya project, which aims to reshape the Yucatán Peninsula.[1] Partially inaugurated in December 2023, the 1554 km railway with 34 stops crosses 40 districts (Fondo Nacional de Fomento al Turismo, 2023; Presidente de la República, 2019:29). The pursuit of new markets has increased physical violence along the route, embodying a "violence-economy-infrastructure nexus" (Dorsch and Maheswaran, 2026), a shift from the prior low murder rates, despite the long-term presence of various armed actors. In 2019, Mérida, Yucatán's capital, was even named the safest city in Latin America (Mattiace and Ley, 2022:104 ff.). I try to follow the observations of Gago (2019) and Tyner (2019), who argue that the human body – and its premature death – is at the centre of all structural expressions of physical violence. Its underlying structure, Gago (2019:67) affirms, can be approached based on violence against an individual body. Additionally, I refer to Andueza et al.'s (2021:805) observations, which state that "the human body is treated by capital as a specific technology". Thus, in order to give substance to my hypothesis, it is essential to trace and understand the "transitions of capitalism [. . .] that are currently reshaping the world" (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2019:134).

In the following Sect. 2, therefore, I examine the debate on necropolitics and surplus production, considering the logic of capital and the dynamics of the postcolonial condition. Here, I also explain how dual exploitation is enabled by expropriation under the postcolonial condition in Latin America. Section 3 is based on the real subsumption of societies under capital and explains the human body's transitions to constant capital, how violence serves as an expropriative power, and how necropolitics functions as a productive force. This section traces the existence of a necropolitical mode of production. In the final Sect. 4, I refer to the antagonistic relationship inscribed within these necropolitical relations. Throughout the different sections, the theoretical explanations are linked to the empirical material.

[1] Field research was conducted in summer 2023 together with Sowmya Maheswaran.

2 From where to open the debate; situating the materialist turn in necropolitics

Although current debates in Latin America usually do not refer to capitalism in its postcolonial form, focusing instead on concepts elaborated by decolonial theory, I explicitly develop my arguments from the latter. This is due to the focus that decolonial thought has chosen and its understanding of ongoing colonial patterns "in the form of a sociocultural hierarchy of European and non-European", i.e. "coloniality" (Quijano and Wallerstein, 1992:550). The "coloniality of power", as Quijano (2007:171) later explained, manifests itself mainly in the spheres of culture, knowledge, and identity, taking into account hybrid expressions – of which the works on the hybrid identity of mestizaje (Sigüenza, 2023) offer valuable insights. However, hybrid *material* forms are given less attention. Frantz Fanon (1978), who is decisive for the decolonial thinker Walter Mignolo (2012), too, spoke of how the colonized internalized the colonial logic and thereby reproduced the colonial and capitalist system by themselves – a conclusion of dialectical developments that Fanon (1978:132 ff.) also drew from his observation of the postcolonial processes in Latin America. In my view, a postcolonial approach theorizes contemporary new subjectivities and modes of production from pre-colonial realities, colonial experience, and capitalist globalization. Although these pre-colonial realities can be worked out, they appear to exist purely discursively rather than materialize (Harootunian, 2015:198).

Simultaneously, a related debate on relative surplus population examines how capital accumulation systematically devalues labour, excluding certain bearers of labour power from entering the valorization process (Marx, 1982:781 ff.). Bringing the two strands together strengthens the argument that surplus populations must be understood within "wider circuits of capital accumulation" (Bernards and Soederberg, 2021:413), while "being constituted by and constituting the contemporary terrain of capitalism" and being "differentiated by their position within the capitalist mode of production" (Tyner, 2019:54). As Shaw and Waterstone (2021:3) note, these populations are "rooted in the flesh of the planet" and embedded in specific geographies rather than existing as an aspatial mass. In 2020, over 60 % of the global workforce was employed in the informal sector, highlighting capital's limited capacity to integrate labour power – a condition that, as Graf (2024) vividly demonstrates through the Chilean Mapuche population, offers no benefit to the majority of those affected, who function as surplus for the global market.

Meanwhile in Latin America, necropolitics manifests through violence shaped by racial, colonial, and gendered structures, intertwining local and global power relations (Hutta and Husseini De Araújo, 2023:78). In Brazil, Alves (2014) shows how racialized regimes sustain control over black urban spaces, while Hutta (2022) traces the state and parastate escalation of lethal force. Denyer Willis (2015) vividly describes São Paulo's "killing consensus", rooted in

the prior "militarization of urban marginality" (Wacquant, 2008:58; emphasis in original), while Auyero et al. (2014) document Buenos Aires' privatized circuits of power, where violence escapes legal oversight and has been democratized, being no longer the sole preserve of the state (Auyero and Sobering, 2017). In all those cases, violence is determined by a logic – entwined with its gendered and racialized logics – which this text seeks to explore. Mbembe (2003) grounds necropolitics in racialization but, as Islekel (2022) notes, neglects gender and sexuality. Wright (2011) shows how femicide in northern Mexico fuses patriarchy with the politics of death; Hume and Wilding (2015) stress intersectional, colonial–patriarchal dimensions, through which, in the words of Segato (2016a:621), a "lordship" manifests itself, "a mafia-like management of business, politics, and justice" deciding over "life and death on the planet". Fuentes Díaz (2012) ties such violence to colonial exploitation in Mexico and Central America, producing authoritarian relations and normalizing brutality. In this light, the exercise of violence becomes not merely destructive but functional and productive in sustaining a social order. At this point, it therefore seems illuminating, in the words of McIntyre and Nast (2011), to describe the spatial manifestation of necropolitics as a "necropolis": zones of limitless exploitation of people and nature, governed solely by necropolitical logic, and therefore referred to as the "anti-black necropolis" in the case of urban Brazil described by Alves (2014:335). Emerging from the violence of necropolitics, the necropolis is not fixed in size or location but appears at the micro scale – local or regional – within national territory. Its duration varies, and it is marked by the suspension of state law and the use of violence. In Michoacán, Mexico, for instance, such spaces have formed where local and transnational market dynamics were controlled by multiple public and private actors whose sovereignty depended on physical violence against the population (Dorsch, 2021).

An additional distinction to be made here is that the human body of necropolitics is not the same as the black body of slavery. To paraphrase Mbembe (2017:79), the latter has a "potential substance" that is primarily not to be destroyed but to be utilized. "The matter produced from the brow sweat of slaves", writes Mbembe (2019:166), "also has an active value insofar as the slave transforms nature". The enslaved person's work takes place as unpaid labour and thus enters the circulation of capital (Moore, 2015:71). Although, then, the enslaved person is *also* a killable subject, unlike its vis-à-vis, the body of necropolitics is *exclusively* subject to this condition of being killed, tortured, or disappeared. Nevertheless, social conditions shaped by processes of racialization are also evident here, leading, in the case of Brazil for example, to black bodies being constructed as "nonbeings reduced to physicality" (Alves, 2018:12).

Valencia (2016) convincingly argues that violence is used to control populations and territories in order to exert power over life by producing death. This produces new values, practices, and symbolism, all of which have a necropolitical meaning and follow economic imperatives. Finally, violence is also accompanied by a communicative element that creates social cohesion, conveys who the sovereign is (Segato, 2016b), and even constitutes a necropolitical sort of "social life" (Alves, 2018:56).

For this article, my interest lies in the underlying logic of capital rather than its surface presentation. At this point, I fully agree with Hutta (2022:1833), as "it is often not specified precisely how power is enacted, who is affected, or how a 'sovereign' order differs from other formations of power and authority. In these respects, sovereignty remains somewhat elusive." The decisive factor, then, is not a quantitative dimension according to which, for example, the productivity of necropolitics is only given above a certain level of killings or disappearances. What counts is the structural functionality of violence amid the production process.

Consequently, it seems worthwhile to combine the logic of violence with the laws of capital movements under postcolonial auspices, thereby tying in with those debates. This is where my hypothesis formulated at the beginning comes in: violence is to be understood as an expropriative power, and the human body as a target of violence, as a means of labour and, therefore, as constant capital in the capitalist production process.

The surroundings of the Tren Maya illustrate this clearly. In Felipe Carrillo Puerto, a Tren Maya stop, deadly violence surged with the project's announcement: 13 alleged criminals were murdered by hybrid sovereignty structures in 2019 alone (Redacción 24 Horas, 2025), and 51 people disappeared between January 2019 and July 2025 (Comisión Nacional de Búsqueda, 2025). In neighbouring José María Morelos, a mass grave was discovered in June 2023 (del La Palabra del Caribe, 2023). Nuevo Jerusalén, 140 km southwest, serves as a strategic hinterland for Bacalar's tourist corridor (which has a Tren Maya stop). Local activists report curfews imposed by hybrid sovereignty structures and corpses dumped at the Divorciados crossroads.[2] According to them, violence is directly linked to the megaproject, whose announcement promised high profits and new markets, triggering struggles over territorial control.[3]

Especially in ex-colonies, violence continues to function as a means of overcoming borders and transforming the borderlands behind them (Schetter and Müller-Koné, 2021). But, we might ask, what is the purpose of this control over territories and populations? What processes does this control unleash, and what are the benefits of power over life? The point, here, is to look at violence not from a state's perspective but from the perspective of capital: *to see like capital*.

[2]The interview was conducted in Nuevo Jerusalén on 10 August 2023.

[3]The interview was conducted in Felipe Carrillo Puerto on 12 August 2023.

2.1 Logics of capital

Capital knows only the world market as a frontier in its extensive dimension. It breaks through national and other spatial boundaries, seeking to expropriate territories and populations – that is, to appropriate them without exchange, without equivalent, as Foster and Clark (2020:2) point out. It penetrates and restructures the frontier and, thus, the non-capitalist outside. The concepts of formal and real subsumption, discussed in detail later on, capture these transitions (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013:72 f.).

In Latin America, triggered by the neoliberal phase of global capitalism, "externally imposing unbending rule regimes enforced by global institutions and policed by local functionaries" (Peck and Tickell, 2002:381), a "geographical reorganization" took place and new "capitalist spaces" emerged (Álvarez, 2008:67 ff.). The Tren Maya project exemplifies this dynamic, being constructed in a region once characterized by subsistence agriculture and communal land tenure, which is being violently reconfigured, step by step, into a logistics hub for freight transport, tourism, and resource extraction. Continuities and new forms of capital accumulation permeate these restructured spaces, showing that they operate "under the conditions of postcolonial capitalism" (Samaddar, 2018:72). Here, the necropolis – the Tren Maya's violent borderland – functions as a concrete materialized expression of those dynamics.

These developments suggest that our understanding of exploitation, expropriation, and labour must be reconfigured. Due to the historical constitution of the capitalist world system, the relationship between capital and labour in formerly colonized countries does not necessarily take the form of wages in the majority of cases (Mies, 1996:218). In parallel with the gendered and racialized division of labour, it is more appropriate to speak of dependent labour in this context (Cox and Federici, 1975; Fraser, 2018). As Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) argue, we need to face a "multiplication of labor". Exploitation is, therefore, not a purely economic relationship but a thoroughly political one and assumes heterogeneous forms (Mezzadri, 2021:64). For this reason, "the traditional conceptual distinction between productive and unproductive labour and between production and reproduction [. . .] should today be considered defunct" (Hardt and Negri, 1994:9). What is essential at this point is, first and foremost, the fact that in the course of capitalist reproduction, exploitation has gone beyond its classical site of surplus value production, the factory, the plantation, and the domestic sphere. Other social spaces, objects, and relations became subsumed: "capital is not just specific exploitation within production", wrote Antonio Negri (1991:86; emphasis in original), "but it *also acquires for itself, gratuitously, social dimensions which are only produced by the force of living labor*". He further wrote: "Capital constitutes society, capital is entirely social capital" (Negri, 1991:114; emphasis in original). Hardt and Negri (1994:140) jointly put it as follows: society "is entirely absorbed within the demands of the reproduction of capital".

Meanwhile, necropolitics in postcolonial Latin America operates through a dual exploitation enabled by expropriation. Following Søren Mau's (2023) analysis of capitalism's mute compulsion – the silent, non-violent economic coercion that renders wage labour seemingly voluntary – I argue that necropolitics generates what might be termed the *mute compulsion of necropolitical violence*. In territories under necropolitical regimes, populations that do not directly suffer physical violence nonetheless live under its permanent threat. Disappearances, torture, and killings of some – the expropriative power of necropolitics, as it leads into an expropriation of human bodies – create a silent compulsion for all others. Following Lazzarato (2023), who argues that violence is a precondition for production, violence such as the one described here is always necessary when people still have access to the means of production, i.e. to land and to their own bodies (Mies, 1996:217 f.). We witness the production of a new social order that disciplines bodies, suppresses resistance, and renders populations docile and exploitable in wage-dependent labour relations. This is indirect exploitation; expropriation enables exploitation through the mediation of necropolitical violence. I will not go deeper into this, though, as my focus lies on the second dimension within dual exploitation. Simultaneously, necropolitics entails direct exploitation through what I term "necropolitical labour": productive work performed with instruments of violence on the expropriated body itself. Sicarios, who "process" targets and disappear human bodies, as well as forced labourers in drug production sites, all perform productive labour in Marx's strict sense: they apply labour power, by means of instruments, to a labour object. They may be recruited from the large surplus population, from all those whose labour power is not required in the formal economy. It is one of the few ways that these labourers can reproduce and live somewhat normally.

These two forms of exploitation – one indirect (disciplinary), one direct (productive) – are entangled. The same necropolitical violence that generates profit upon expropriation (killing, kidnapping, extortion) simultaneously enables exploitation through mute compulsion (disciplining workers) and through necropolitical labour (processing bodies). Under postcolonial real subsumption, these moments fuse into a differentiated accumulation regime.

In societies subsumed under capital's logic, productive labour need not produce a tangible commodity; supervisory (as in a factory) and coercive functions can also constitute productive labour when they directly serve capitalist valorization (Marx, 1969:412, 1982:643 ff.). This insight can be extended through feminist critiques of reproductive labour (Cox and Federici, 1975). Family households themselves are "sites of production" (Vogel, 2000:153). Reproductive labour is necessary labour for capital accumulation, even if it does not directly create surplus value, hinting at the impossibility

of demonstrating empirically where exactly the surplus value is added to a commodity. Analogously, necropolitical violence constitutes necessary labour for specific forms of postcolonial accumulation. It does not directly produce surplus value, but it produces the social fabric in which surplus value can be extracted. The difference from reproductive labour lies in the following: while the latter produces labour power (variable capital), necropolitical violence produces the territorial and social order within which both labour power can be exploited and resources can be expropriated.

2.2 Necropolitics under a postcolonial condition

Having established capital's general expropriative logic and the dual character of necropolitical exploitation, I now turn to the specific conditions under which this entanglement operates in postcolonial spaces. In contrast to the approach of structural heterogeneity (Quijano, 2000), according to which semi-feudal, slave, and capitalist modes of production coexist, the *postcolonial condition*, "as a *predicament*, an age that speaks of a condition with its contradictions, a site of new struggles, contradictory possibilities and new transformations" (Samaddar, 2018:19, emphasis in original), integrates all social elements into the capitalist logic of exploitation and organizes the logic of capital under postcolonial auspices. Here, the existence of racialized and gendered surplus populations (Bernards and Soederberg, 2021; Islekel, 2022; Segato, 2016a; Shaw and Waterstone, 2021) takes on new meaning.

Usually, the mode of production is understood as the "*unity*" between productive forces and relations of production, and every "concrete social formation is based on a *dominant* mode of production" as well as on one or more "dominated modes" (Althusser, 2014:19 f.; emphasis in original). Under the postcolonial condition, these different modes of production are synchronized and complementary to each other – a point I will get back to at the end of this text.

The postcolonial condition refers to the formerly colonized world that is now formally independent, yet remains subordinated to the neocolonial power of imperial countries. This condition entails "a mark of the combination of the most advanced and primitive forms of accumulation" (Samaddar, 2018:20) and which, with no surprise, also includes the political economy of necropolitics. In this sense, Samaddar's remarks tie in with Mariátegui's (2007:43 ff.) conclusions about the colonial regime at least as well as Quijano's work does. Quijano's analysis is itself strongly inspired by Mariátegui. According to Harootunian (2015:116), Mariátegui, like Gramsci, to whom Samaddar strongly refers, was convinced of an image of a present at the beginning of the 20th century "with heterogeneous and fractured nonsynchronicities or co-evalities, where the presence of pasts unwillingly and unknowingly mingled with each other". Only later would a combined, synchronized set of social relations emerge from pre-colonial, semi-feudal, and enslaved relations under the dominance of capitalism. Capital strives to "metabolize them into its inside to serve the creation of value" and without losing every element of its "identity of the older practice, which continued to mark its difference in unevenness" (Harootunian, 2015:38 f.). This encounter between capitalism and older forms of practices is denominated *formal subsumption* and "constituted the sign of capitalism's contingent development" (Harootunian, 2015:59). Schematically speaking, formal subsumption describes the process of integrating existing labour processes into the circulation of capital. These labour processes are then synchronized with the capitalist production of value without the capitalist having direct access to shaping the labour process (Marx, 1982:424 f.). Formal subsumption is the general form under the capital relation and refers to the relation of capital to its outside as it expands (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2019:78). Along the Tren Maya route, Maya communities' traditional agricultural practices and collective land governance – the ejido system – are being forcibly integrated into capitalist circuits, not by abolishing them entirely but by subordinating them to the railway's logistical demands and the tourism industry's labour requirements. This dynamic of subordination may have its origin in semi-feudal forms and has been "put into the practice of serving capitalism" (Harootunian, 2015:150). In fact, as Fraser (2018:8) convincingly argues, capitalism enables the constant reproduction of these frontier spaces, in which subjects are constituted as "expropriable subjects". The violence happening here is linked to capitalist accumulation, as described by Fuentes Díaz (2018:159), who argues that death enables value production, and by Valencia (2016:26 and 154), who sees the body transformed into a commodity consumed as a spectacle. Also, Reguillo (2021:52 f.) traces the body's transition into an anonymous mass.

Simultaneously, the form of political rule cannot be separated from capitalist accumulation; otherwise, any description would be an ahistorical conceptualization (Mau, 2023:147 f.), falling into an economistic analysis (Engels, 1984; Althusser, 2014:209–2017). Extending Mbembe's (2003) debate on necropolitics through a materialist lens can illuminate how the sovereign power to kill, torture, and disappear to preserve social order is intertwined with the logic of capital reproduction. Necropolitics, and this is crucial, is part of the mode of production.

Under classic capitalist conditions, the general conditions of production are guaranteed, i.e. the state secures property rights, infrastructure exists, and labour power is already disciplined. Under postcolonial conditions, particularly within the necropolis, this is not the case. Here, these conditions must be permanently and actively produced through physical violence. There is no state apparatus to assume this function. Violence is no historical event that eventually concludes but a constitutive element of ongoing reproduction. What elsewhere appears as an external precondition of production is

here part of the production process itself. The boundary between conditions of production and production dissolves.

3 Unveiling the productivity of necropolitics

Contributing to the materialist approach to the debate on necropolitics can be advanced by considering Marx's analysis from the first volume of *Capital* in parts from back to front, similar to what Mezzadra (2011:307) calls for, keeping in mind the "transitions of capitalism [. . .] that are currently reshaping the world" (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2019:134). Marx's explanations end with the so-called original accumulation, understood as the initial condition for all capitalist accumulation and thus the "historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production" (Marx, 1982:875). This separation – the expropriation of former producers and their means of production by capital, constituting a "profit upon expropriation as a particular form of profitability, distinct from profit upon production" (Foster and Clark, 2020:6) – occurs by force (Marx, 1982:915). This is accompanied by corresponding "change[s] in the form" (Marx, 1982:875) of social relations of domination, whereby the process of so-called original accumulation – and this point will become central in the following – "assumes different aspects in different countries" (Marx, 1982:876).

Since capitalist accumulation must always begin anew in order for capital to reproduce itself, the so-called original accumulation must also be understood as a constant "process" (Mezzadra, 2011:307) so that the provision of the initial conditions for actual capitalist accumulation in the form of a violent transition is always present, even for transitions that are "internal to the capitalist mode of production" (Mezzadra, 2011:314). In particular, postcolonial capitalism is characterized by a "combination of the virtual and the most primitive forms of accumulation", leading to a "postcolonial age" in which "war becomes crucial to accumulation and reordering of space" (Samaddar, 2018:77 f.). The violence surrounding the Tren Maya – mass graves in José María Morelos, disappearances in Felipe Carrillo Puerto, curfews in Nuevo Jerusalén – constitutes precisely this ongoing original accumulation and imposes new social relations favourable to capitalist interests.

While the concept of formal subsumption has already been explained above, the transitions to real subsumption can always begin anew whenever a new frontier must be expropriated – violently seized without equivalent – and then subsumed into production through exploitation. However, actual capitalist production only begins when capital intervenes in the organization of the production process (Marx, 1982:341), when the "command of capital" (Marx, 1982:481) prevails. This change of form encompasses the real subsumption, under which a "complete (and constantly continuing and repeating) revolution takes place in the mode of production itself" (Marx, 2018:117). Hardt and Negri (1994:223) define real subsumption as the point "when labor is incorporated not as an external but as an internal force, proper to capital itself". Domestic work in western Europe also became subject to real subsumption when the state began to increasingly link internal processes and dynamics with the requirements of the labour market (Federici, 2020:59) or, once non-capitalist and self-administered modes of production, which emerged during the crises in Latin America, have been linked to financialized capitalism through debt (Gago, 2022). From then on, capitalist labour processes take place as cooperation between individual workers. It is from this cooperation that the collective worker emerges, and the resulting "productive power [. . .] appears as the productive power of capital" (Marx, 1982:481). The transition from formal to real subsumption is constitutive of capitalist development, with real subsumption encompassing the developed capitalist form of production. Thus, an expropriative power of capital – operating at its external boundaries – seizes territories, populations, and bodies, which then become subsumed into production through dual exploitation. This entanglement of expropriation and dual exploitation characterizes the transition from formal to real subsumption in postcolonial spaces: what begins as violent seizure becomes integrated into production, until expropriation itself becomes directly productive.

Similarly, not only is the capital–labour relationship permeated by real subsumption, but the non-capitalist outside has also been integrated into it. The transition is complete "when the entire context of reproduction is subsumed under capitalist rule; that is, when reproduction and the vital relations that constitute it themselves become directly productive" (Hardt and Negri, 2000:364). Hence it is necessary that "contemporary society should now be recognized as a factory-society" (Hardt and Negri, 1994:14). Here, Samaddar's insight connects the factory society directly: if the entire society becomes a factory (real subsumption), then the forms this takes will differ between the Global North and postcolonial spaces. What is unique about the postcolonial condition is that this factory society manifests through the combination of advanced and primitive forms of accumulation (Samaddar, 2018:20). In postcolonial spaces, individual productive labour becomes cooperative not only through the wage form (as in classical factory-society) but through diverse forms that integrate pre-capitalist, semi-feudal, and contemporary capitalist relations into a differentiated accumulation regime (Samaddar, 2018:152). Also entering the stage here is the surplus population, selling their labour power to perform necropolitical labour and expropriating human bodies from their subjects in order to contribute to the factory society in which surplus value can be extracted.

Today, everything has an exchange value; use values "have progressively vanished" (Hardt and Negri, 2000:386). However, "progressively" does not mean "totally", i.e. capital can always find new social relations organized by real subsumption. The "postcolonial dilemma is around the issue of transition", writes Samaddar (2018:71). Unlike in the Global

North, where real subsumption largely displaced formal subsumption, the postcolonial condition is characterized by their simultaneous presence and mutual reinforcement. The logic and dynamics of formal and real subsumption, and the capitalist patterns that emerge from them, are spatially unequal. Heterogeneity is the norm rather than the exception, resulting in differential modes of accumulation to accommodate this heterogeneous initial situation (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2019:128 ff.). This unequal space is variable, and "detecting the frontiers of valorization becomes a key aim" (Gago and Mezzadra, 2017:585). Along the Tren Maya corridor, multiple frontiers converge: the Yucatán's ecosystems opened for tourism and extraction; Maya cultural identities commodified for heritage tourism; and – as I argue here – the human body itself, as Andueza et al. (2021:806) state. "The capitalist production process, therefore, is not merely the production of commodities", once wrote Marx (1969:401): "It is a process which absorbs unpaid labor, which makes raw materials and means of labor – the means of production – into means for the absorption of unpaid labor." Moore (2015) has developed convincing analyses on this point, which are also important for my considerations.

However, the concept of expropriative power describes my subject matter much more accurately than the concept of appropriation to which Moore (2015) refers. According to Foster and Clark (2020:3 f.), appropriation is a social practice common to all human societies and their material conditions. Expropriation, however, is an element of genuinely capitalist society, without any equivalent being provided in return – nature and bodies function as available resources, as gifts to capital. For understanding necropolitics, this distinction is crucial. What we witness in Latin America is an expropriative power generating dual exploitation: indirectly, through what I term after Mau (2023), the *mute compulsion of necropolitical violence* that disciplines entire populations into exploitable labour forces (along the Tren Maya project, e.g. workers in export-producing factories, tourism, or agriculture); and directly, through necropolitical labour – productive work with instruments of violence on expropriated bodies. Despite this criticism, it is crucial to return to Moore's (2015) remarks on the law of value, which is intact only when many other things have no value attached to the conditions for the accumulation of capital. The relation of value thus goes beyond the circulation of capital. It encompasses more processes and relations than the mere production process (Moore, 2015:54 f.). To elaborate further, this means that the value form (the commodity) and its substance (abstract labour) depend on value relations based on unpaid labour: the "value *form* and the value *relation* are non-identical. The 'commodification of everything' can only be sustained through incessant revolutionizing – yes, of the forces of production, but also of the *relations of reproduction*" (Moore, 2015:65; emphasis in original).

A necropolitical mode of production

Capital requires an expropriative power to absorb substances and relations outside value production. In a finite world of endless accumulation, it seeks new zones of expropriation. In Latin America's postcolonial condition, necropolitics fulfils this role. Crucially, this expropriative violence is not merely destructive but directly productive: it generates surplus value through dual exploitation – indirectly by disciplining populations into exploitable labour forces and directly through necropolitical labour that processes expropriated bodies as raw materials. While rejecting Yates's (2011:1690) claim that surplus populations are akin to waste, I subscribe to the emphasis on the contradiction between labour's disposability and its necessity for accumulation. These subjects are not useless in absolute terms; rather, "their labour is surplus in relation to its utility for capital" (Li, 2009:68; emphasis in original). Yet expropriation does not remain external to production. In postcolonial Latin America, necropolitical expropriation becomes subsumed into production through dual exploitation, as already outlined.

Violence functions differently under formal and real subsumption. Under the former, it is an extra-economic technique for asserting interests, undetermined by capital. Here, violence operates primarily as expropriation. Under the latter, violence becomes directly productive: violence no longer merely enables accumulation from outside but generates surplus value from within production itself. Under real subsumption, violence as an expropriative power becomes simultaneously disciplinary (enabling exploitation through the mute compulsion) and directly productive (constituting exploitation through necropolitical labour that processes bodies as raw materials). First, violence functions as indirect exploitation through disciplinary subjection. First, indirect exploitation through disciplinary subjection. Of the populations surrounding Tren Maya, many do not directly suffer disappearances or killings. Yet they live under the permanent threat of such violence. This threat, the *mute compulsion of necropolitical violence*, functions as silent coercion. Just as wage dependency makes workers "voluntarily" sell labour power because they have no alternative, necropolitics creates violent compulsion – workers submit to exploitative conditions because refusal or resistance means death/disappearance. Along Tren Maya, indigenous communities accept displacement; workers accept poverty wages in tourist resorts; peasants accept the loss of land. The bodies of those who have disappeared or been killed discipline the living bodies of all others for their exploitability. This is indirect exploitation: expropriation enables exploitation under necropolitics. Second, concerning direct exploitation, surplus population functions as necropolitical labourers. With instruments of violence, they perform productive labour on the expropriated bodies: sicarios receiving payment per killing; forced labourers in clandestine laboratories; those who dispose of corpses; guards who manage clandestine detention centres

or drug laboratories, etc. Necropolitics as productive labour must be understood through the entanglement of expropriation and dual exploitation. In classical Marxist terms, productive labour generates surplus value within the formal production process through the exploitation of formally free wage labour. Expropriation, by contrast, generates surplus *outside* formal production. Yet under postcolonial real subsumption, this boundary dissolves.

This dual exploitation exemplifies, by combining Hardt and Negri (1994) with Samaddar (2018), a *factory society under postcolonial conditions*. Factory society designates the phase where the entire context of social reproduction becomes directly productive under real subsumption (Hardt and Negri, 2000:364). Yet this universal tendency manifests differently in postcolonial spaces. As Samaddar (2018:152) shows, the postcolonial condition is marked by heterogeneity: advanced forms of exploitation combine with primitive forms. How, then, is the value of this necessary labor realized? Under real subsumption, the distinction between productive and unproductive labour becomes questionable (Hardt and Negri, 1994:9). If society as a whole becomes a factory, then the labour that maintains this factory – including violence, including necropolitical labour – is productive labour. The value produced does not realize itself in a single commodity but in the total process of social reproduction under capitalist auspices. Necropolitical violence produces the order – territorial control, disciplined populations, and eliminated competition – that functions as the condition of possibility for valorization processes. This order is not external to accumulation but internal to it. The value of necropolitical labour realizes itself not as an independent commodity but as a share of the surplus value generated in the production processes it enables. This also explains why violence must continue: the order must be permanently reproduced for accumulation to proceed. Necropolitics works therefore simultaneously as an expropriative power and an enabler for exploitative labour. The "necropolis" (McIntyre and Nast, 2011) thus constitutes a particular spatial form of the factory society in the postcolonial condition. In the necropolis, violence itself becomes a productive force: disappearances discipline workers in maquiladoras, while sicarios work on expropriated bodies. The necropolis is both a disciplinary apparatus and a production site.

Now, if capitalist labour is not only just wage labour, if the site of value production is not only just the factory, the household or the plantation, and if processes of valorization are not just expansive, then the fact of the real subsumption of societies – including Latin American societies – leads to an understanding of expanded value production by subdividing it into value form and value relation in order to penetrate the reproduction of capital. However, it should be noted that value cannot be empirically measured during the production process. Expropriating the human subject of its body already expresses an extraction of value. As a further element in the expanded relation of value, the human body undergoes a transformation that enables it to assume a new function within the production process initiated by necropolitics. From now on, the subject is no longer of interest as a bearer of labour power, i.e. as variable capital. However, unlike Alves's (2018:8) conclusion that murdered black bodies function as "raw material for the Brazilian project of state making", in my analysis, the expropriated bodies serve as "raw material", too, but they serve capital accumulation as "*circulating* constant capital" (Marx, 1982:284; 1992:472; emphasis in original). Raw materials, i.e. all that has been "filtered through previous labor", together with the "object of labor" – in our case, a technological instrument for processing the body – form the "means of production" (Marx, 1982:287).

To be precise: the body is the material upon which violence is exercised. Just as raw materials are consumed in the production process, the body is consumed in necropolitical order-production – killed, disappeared, tortured. The value transferred here is not the value of the body as a commodity (as in slavery) but the value that society has invested in the production of this body – education, health, socialization. This socially produced value is destroyed through violence – yet this destruction is productive for a specific form of accumulation: it secures territories and disciplines populations. Necropolitical accumulation lives by destroying socially produced value to gain control, which in turn enables the extraction of surplus value in the production processes unfolding within the necropolis. The Tren Maya exemplifies this: violence along the route is not incidental but creates the conditions for the infrastructure project and its associated profits. Mass graves, disappearances, and public executions are not excesses but functional elements of capital's territorial reorganization.

As the raw materials are used up in the course of the labour process, new ones must constantly flow into the process for the benefit of the reproduction of the capital cycle (Marx, 1992:248; see also Moore, 2015:93 f.). In short, the expropriated body ceases to function as variable capital (bearer of labour power) and becomes constant capital (raw material); necropolitical labour functions as variable capital (productive labour). The output of direct exploitation is surplus value, and it demonstrates violence's productivity: killing, disappearing, and torturing are not external to value production but constitute its material basis in postcolonial spaces. Through violence, necropolitics expropriates these bodies, stripping them of any exchange value: "necropolitical subjects were rendered a free gift of nature to be taken and used at will" (McIntyre and Nast, 2011:1472). Necropolitics targets the human body, incorporating it into the expanded value relation and making it a frontier for expropriation and dual exploitation in Latin America. The killings, disappearances, and the like must continue if this very specific form of postcolonial capital accumulation is to reproduce itself.

That the body is now a direct component of production does not signal the completion of processes like original ac-

cumulation in Latin America. Rather, different capital fractions within a territory pursue varied spatial accumulation strategies: some depend on technological innovation in the automotive sector or extended working hours in services, while others secure dominance or advantages over competitors through necropolitics, using violence as an expropriative power to impose territorial control and domination over local populations. Expropriation becomes productive while enabling productivity elsewhere.

Capital organizes this violence through the hybrid sovereignty structures operating along the Tren Maya corridor. These actors – cartels intertwined with local police, politicians, and legal businesses – do not act randomly. Their violence follows the logic of territorial control necessary for capital accumulation. Therefore, they eliminate rival groups, discipline local populations into compliance, and secure the infrastructure corridor for freight and tourism. Violence is no longer an act of individual cruelty but is incorporated into the production process as part of the "reproduction of the conditions of production" (Althusser, 2014:82; emphasis in original). Thus, necropolitics is not only a logic inscribed in the value relation but also in the reproduction relations of capital. Finally, as an enabler of physical violence understood as an expropriative power, necropolitics functions as a productive force.

At this point, this last category remains unclear. Seibert (2017:273) argues that "productive forces" must be understood in relation to human labour rather than reduced to technical means. Thus, if necropolitics works as a productive force, its manifestation through violence must be seen as productive labour – defined by the values of the given social and historical capitalist context (Hardt and Negri, 1994:8) and on whether it is "from the outset subsumed under capital" (Marx, 1969:401). *Seeing like capital, again*.

Bringing the transitions together, necropolitics enables necessary labour for postcolonial accumulation. Having been transformed into circulating constant capital, the body is consumed by the production of a necropolitical order that facilitates the extraction of surplus value. The value of this necessary labour realizes itself not in a discrete commodity but in the total process of capital reproduction within the necropolis. Under Latin America's postcolonial condition, all these elements together constitute a dominated "mode of production" (Marx, 1959:105) complementary to and synchronized with dominant market-based legal capitalist accumulation. Since the "manner in which the productive forces are exchanged is decisive for the manner in which the products are exchanged" (Marx, 1959:104 f.), it is compelling to speak of a *domestic necropolitical capitalist mode of production* within the necropolis. Thus, under postcolonial real subsumption, the factory society continues to take the shape of necropolitics.

4 Glimpsing a politics of liberation

This text situates violence in Latin America within capitalist relations of production. The transitions analysed – the expanded value relation, the body as circulating constant capital, necropolitics as productive force – reveal how physical violence is inscribed in capital reproduction under postcolonial conditions. This materialist approach does not mean that necropolitics will inevitably affect all of humanity or all members of Latin American societies, nor will it be found everywhere in the world. "It is necessary", as Tyner (2019:14; emphasis in original) states, "to view the vulnerable subject *not* as a universal or transhistorical figure, but as one that is intimately produced within specific modes of production articulated across myriad spaces and scales". Nor does the materialist turn embody a dystopian vision; rather, it highlights an existing tendency that requires further theoretical and empirical development. Although it centres on capital circuits under postcolonial conditions, the necropolitical mode of production is founded on pre-existing inequalities based on race, gender, and the production of global surplus population.

The transitions outlined here need to be transformed into an antagonistic relationship, both theoretically and practically. Following on from the concluding words in Alves's (2018:262) impressive book *The anti-black city*, this requires me to ask: what politics of liberation are possible under these circumstances? Which previous social forms of political organizations will inevitably become obsolete? And who, both individually and collectively, will embody these struggles of liberation? It is only when subjective and objective factors jointly provide glimpses about the world that the presentiment of a politics of liberation can become a certainty.

Data availability. The ethnographic data contain sensitive information and are not publicly accessible. Please contact the author regarding any questions you might have.

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