

Biopolitical Imperialism and Necropolitics: David Hare's *Via Dolorosa*

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Abstract

Biopolitical imperialism is an extension of Michel Foucault's biopolitics and Vladimir Lenin's imperialism. Mark G. E. Kelly emphasises the biopolitical nature of imperialism in colonised Third World nations. Likewise, Achille Mbembe's necropolitics is an outgrowth of Foucault's biopolitics. It also heavily relies on Giorgio Agamben's notion of a state of exception. Mbembe's paradigm for necropolitics is centred on the value of human life, namely the power of colonial powers to decide who should die and who should survive. David Hare's *Via Dolorosa* has been the source of great interest since its first premiere at the Royal Court Theatre, London in 1997. The play considers one of the most devastating events in world politics, the Israel-Palestinian conflict. *Via Dolorosa* also shows how biopolitical imperialism works and offers a necropolitical landscape with states that have power over life and those that only have power over death. The play, which reminds the audience of the Holocaust, not only links biopolitical elements of imperialism and necropolitics, but also shows that victims may become victimizers. This article explores the biopolitical and necropolitical aspects of Hare's *Via Dolorosa* regarding the tensions resulting from Western imperialism in the Middle East.

Keywords: David Hare, *Via Dolorosa*, British theatre, biopolitical imperialism, necropolitics

BİYOPOLİTİK EMPERYALİZM VE NEKROPOLİTİKA: DAVID HARE'İN VIA DOLOROSA OYUNU

Öz

Biyopolitik emperyalizm, Michel Foucault'nun biyopolitikasının ve Vladimir Lenin'in emperyalizminin bir uzantısıdır. Mark G. E. Kelly, sömürgeleştirilmiş Üçüncü Dünya ülkelerinde emperyalizmin biyopolitik doğasına vurgu yapmaktadır. Benzer biçimde, Achille Mbembe'nin nekropolitika kavramı Foucault'nun biyopolitika anlayışının bir uzantısıdır. Bunun yanı sıra büyük ölçüde Giorgio Agamben'in istisna hâli kavramına dayanmaktadır. Mbembe'nin nekropolitika paradigması, insan yaşamının değerine, yani sömürgeci güçlerin kimin öleceğine ve kimin hayatta kalacağına karar verme gücüne odaklanır. David Hare'nin *Via Dolorosa* oyunu, 1997 yılında Londra Royal Court Tiyatrosu'ndaki ilk gösteriminden bu yana büyük ilgi odağı olmuştur. Oyun, dünya siyasetindeki en yıkıcı olaylardan biri olan İsrail-Filistin çatışmasını ele almaktadır. *Via Dolorosa*, ayrıca, biyopolitik emperyalizmin nasıl çalıştığını gösterirken yaşam ve ölüm üzerinde gücü bulunan biyopolitik devletlerden nekropolitik bir manzara sunmaktadır. İzleyiciye Holokost'u anımsatan oyun, emperyalizmin biyopolitik unsurlarını nekropolitika ile ilişkilendirirken, aynı za-

manda, mağdurların mağdur edene dönüşebileceğini de göstermektedir. Bu makale Hare'in *Via Dolorosa* oyununda yer alan, Ortadoğu'da Batı emperyalizminden kaynaklanan gerilimlerin biyopolitik ve nekropolitik yönleri incelemektedir.

Anahtar sözcükler: David Hare, *Via Dolorosa*, Britanya tiyatrosu, biyopolitik emperyalizm, nekropolitika

INTRODUCTION

Dating back to the last years of the nineteenth century, the question of Palestine has been one of the most prolonged unresolved problems and essential subjects of world politics. However, a solid solution has not been reached yet. Colonization, military occupation, displacement, and isolation of Palestinian territory have continued since the beginning of the British mandate. Furthermore, brutality, oppression, torture, tyranny, systematic degradation, elimination, biopolitical control, restrictions, closure, and infringements of human rights against the Palestinian people remains. Palestinian problem takes the following configuration, according to Edward Said, who dealt with the eastern crisis, stating that "[...] if there is no country called Palestine, it is not because there are no Palestinians" (1980, p. 5). Despite international efforts, the question of Palestine remains unsolved. Mark G. E. Kelly, in his book *Biopolitical Imperialism* (2015), and Achille Mbembe, in his research *Necropolitics* (2019), provide critical assessment and a recent theoretical voice to the question of Palestine. While Kelly handles the question regarding Lenin's imperialism and Foucault's biopolitics, Mbembe goes a little further and treats the subject in connection with the power to kill. Mbembe situates his necropolitics argument in the context of present colonial domination and concedes that "the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" (Mbembe, 2003, p. 11). According to Kelly, "[w]hat happened in Gaza is at once extreme and typical" (2015, p. 2) example of biopolitical imperialism. Similarly, Mbembe sees Gaza as a definitive model for necropolitics: "it is the culmination of spatial exclusionary arrangements that existed in an incipient state during the early phases of modern settler or genocidal colonialism" (Mbembe, 2019, p. 97).

The concept of necropolitics is derived from Foucault's concept of biopolitics and is defined as "the endeavor, begun in the eighteenth century, to rationalize the problems presented to governmental practice by the phenomena characteristic of a group of living human beings constituted as a population: health, sanitation, birthrate, longevity, race" (Foucault, 2003, p. 202). Mbembe adapts the idea to postcolonial occupied geographies, claiming that biopower and biopolitics become necropolitics or the politics of death. One could argue that Mbembe's necropolitics is a rereading of Foucault and Agamben's theories. While Foucault coined the term biopolitics, Agamben claims that he did not thoroughly investigate it. Agamben makes a necropolitical rereading of Foucault's concept and then relates it "Foucault's notion of biopower to two other concepts: the state of exception and the state of siege" (Mbembe, 2019, p. 70). According to Agamben, "the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power" (Agamben, 1998, p. 6). Agamben believes that Foucault's theory is a good starting point but needs to be completed due to some gaps in his analysis of power relations:

If Foucault contests the traditional approach to the problem of power, which is exclusively based on juridical models or on institutional models, and if he calls for a 'liberation from the theoretical privilege of sovereignty' in order to construct an analytic of power that would not take law as its model and code, then where, in the body of power, is the zone of indistinction at which technologies of individualization and totalizing procedures converge? And, more generally, is there a unitary center in which the political 'double bind' finds its reasons to be? . . . Confronted with phenomena such as the power of the society of the spectacle that is everywhere transforming the political realm today, is it legitimate or even possible to hold subjective technologies and political technologies apart? (Agamben, 1998, p. 5-6)

Kelly asserts that biopolitics is a type of power that exerts control via scientific knowledge to care for and improve people's lives (Kelly, 2015, p. 8). Biopolitics, then, is the power to divide "people into those who must live and those who must die" (Mbembe, 2019, p. 71). Kelly is of the same opinion. He emphasises that his concept of biopolitical imperialism is fundamentally Marxist and Foucauldian in nature. According to him, "[b]iopolitical imperialism is not meant to be an historically new form, unlike Hardt and Negri's Empire. Imperialism has been biopolitical for a long time: as long as both biopolitics and imperialism have existed concurrently" (Kelly, 2010, p. 16). In his book *Biopolitical Imperialism* Mark G. E. Kelly traces the footsteps of the "biopolitical dimension of imperialism" (Kelly, 2015, p. 17). According to Kelly "biopolitical parasitism" (Kelly, 2015, p. 17) is a different kind of "imperialism which all interlock and complement one another, not only economic and biopolitical, but also political, cultural, military, and epistemic" (Kelly, 2015, p. 18). Kelly claims that the people of the world's wealthiest nations have been unified behind their governments via systems of care and cultivation. In contrast, these states have deliberately prevented the creation of equivalent biopolitics in the poorest regions of the globe. Kelly refers to this tendency as biopolitical imperialism, which entails actively destroying the well-being of people in developing countries to save the lives of people in wealthy countries. (Kelly, 2015, p. 6). Agamben presents three hypotheses for his understanding of biopolitical debate, which he describes as follows:

1. The original political relation is the ban (the state of exception as zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exclusion and inclusion).
2. The fundamental activity of sovereign power is the production of bare life as originary political element and as threshold of articulation between nature and culture, zoe and bios.
3. Today it is not the city but rather the camp that is the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West. (Agamben, 1998, p. 181)

Agamben concedes that by concentrating on the camp, he is able to usefully update archaic notions of conventional political ideology. Agamben's work is capable of serving as political theory, although there are a number of issues with it. The Palestinian issue is a vivid example of the pattern stated above. Furthermore, Agamben suggests that, from the standpoint of contemporary biopolitics, euthanasia is located at the junction of the sovereign choice on life that may be killed and the acceptance of responsibility for the nation's biological body. Euthanasia marks the moment when biopolitics inevitably becomes thanatopolitics (Agamben, 1998, p. 142). Kelly's viewpoint, which is consistent with this method, supports more of Agamben's investigation of biopolitics, as he states:

Imperialism is a form of power that by and large does not care about the lives of its victims. Imperialism, therefore, is primarily thanatopolitical, a politics of death, contrasting with the biopolitics of the population found within the imperial metropole." (Kelly, 2015, p. 18)

Considering the theories of both Kelly and Mbembe, Hare's *Via Dolorosa* presents us with a striking example of biopolitical imperialism and necropolitics exposed by the Israeli and Palestinian administrations.

BIOPOLITICAL IMPERIALISM AND NECROPOLITICS IN *VIA DOLOROSA*

On the proposal to write a play about the British Mandate of Palestine and the Israeli-Palestine war from the Royal Court Theatre, Hare visited Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Gaza, Ramallah, and West Bank in Israel in 1997. He met and spoke with Israeli and Palestinian representatives in politics, academia, and the arts to learn more about the issue. He wrote *Via Dolorosa* as a monologue on his experiences following his visit. He explains his visit and the process of writing the play as follows:

In November 1997, I first went to Israel and Palestine at the request of Elyse Dodgson, the director of the International Department at London's Royal Court Theatre. Elyse hoped that I would be one of three writers- one English, one Israeli and one Palestinian- who would all write plays about the period of the British Mandate in the 1930s and 1940s. On my return, however, I told Stephen Daldry, who had just resigned as the theatre's Artistic Director, that I wanted to write a monologue for myself to perform. (Hare, 1999, p. xi)

The *Via Dolorosa* is a road in Jerusalem's Old City that is claimed to represent the path Jesus took on his journey to his crucifixion. It has enormous religious and historical value, as do many other locations in Jerusalem. Taking the name of a traditional street as the title of his play, Hare believes that *Via Dolorosa* addresses the history of the conflict through the eyes of Israelis and Palestinians. As the writer says, the play "is the story of a Westerner trying to understand two societies where belief is at the centre of the way of life" (Hare, 1999, p. 7).

Strictly believing politics as an indispensable part of a society and having deep distrust of the worldwide political atmosphere, Hare thinks that every individual must struggle with the devastating power of politics or biopolitics. In this sense, it is evident that the playwright intends to confront spectators with the historical and political aspects of the conflict. As Nicole Boireau maintains the audience "is faced with an inextricable political muddle, filtered through the mind of a famous playwright who goes back to his cosy Hampstead home after a harrowing trip to Jerusalem" (2003, p. 34). Throughout the play, the author aims to criticise the global powers' dualist, untrustworthy, treacherous, and precarious politics. As Megson and Rabellato also suggest, "theatre's political purpose is to portray the world, without artifice, and then permit an audience to scrutinise that portrait" (2007, p. 244). Trying to point out the biopolitical imperialist tactics of Israel, Hare identifies the need for a rational method to solve the question of Palestine. While drawing attention to the present state of Palestinians, the playwright depicts Israel's necropolitical power on Palestine.

Via Dolorosa begins with Hare's description of Western culture as "an old bitch gone in the teeth" (Hare, 1998, p. 4). Then he applies this determination to Israel and conducts a psycho-geographic survey of the country:

Israel is, first and foremost, a cause; the cause being a patch of land, north to south on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean, lying like a small brown anchovy set down on a school atlas, to which the most persecuted people of modern times – perhaps the most persecuted people of all times – after the matchless catastrophe of the Holocaust rushed in the perfectly reasonable belief that they would never be safe until they had a country of their own. (Hare, 1998, p. 4).

Following that, Hare discusses the historical and religious complexities of the Palestine-Israel conflict by referring to the establishment process of Israel, Zionism, the Jews being offered a part of Uganda to establish a country, and the Jews' rejection of this offer for religious reasons. According to Hare, the question of Palestine and Israel "can one day be solved" (Hare, 1998, p. 6), but the main problem lies in the spiritual and religious requests. Since "[t]here's a problem at the heart of Zionism" (Hare, 1998, p. 6) and "Israel is effectively a religious state" (Hare, 1998, p. 6), Israelis' rejection of any agreement that gives voice and their lands to Palestine makes it impossible to solve the problem. According to Grossman, an Israeli novelist, the Six-Day War of 1967 changed everything. Grossman's words show the necropolitical state of the occupation:

Something very profound happened to Israel during the Six Day War. For the first time we seized land, we took land by conquest and suddenly the religious Jew saw the Bible not as an historical story, but as a contemporary operations manual. (Hare, 1998, p. 7)

Via Dolorosa is a play that clearly describes how and in what way a contemporary diaspora practice is operated. Within the framework of the play, while "Palestinians are mostly minor characters who work as foils to the Jewish people" (Carol, 2013, p. 112). Israel is portrayed as a nation opposed to Western civilisation, with constant conflict and struggle. Thus, the play reflects "politics as the work of death" (Mbembe, 2003, p. 16). Accordingly, the play also evokes for us what Mbembe identified as "necropolitics, the idea that the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" (Mbembe, 2003, p. 11). *Via Dolorosa*, propelled by the dramatist's involvement in international affairs, also offers to engage the audience in the collaborative separation of people from their lands in the process of biopolitical imperialism. In essence, the play propels itself toward a dramatization of power abuse.

Mbembe also argues that necropolitics is not just about physical death, but also about the ways in which certain populations are rendered dead in terms of their political status. He argues that necropolitics is a way to exclude certain groups from political and social life by excluding them from rights, resources, and opportunities. *Via Dolorosa* also vehemently demonstrates how Israelis constantly justify the abuse of power that results in Palestinian deaths. Hare portrays necropolitics in a harsh light, implying that even First World countries are torturers. As Israeli theatre director Eran points out: "[m]ost Israelis don't even notice the Palestinians. They don't see them. Have you seen how Israelis drive? They don't drive. They own the road" (Hare, 1998, p. 7). In the course of the monologue, Hare depicts his dialogue with Danny and Sarah Weiss, who are travellers. Danny believes that "[t]he Jewish religion is one of the most complex in the world, with the most highly developed system of laws" (Hare, 1998, p. 15), but for Hare, he accepts that they are living "on land stolen by conquest" (Hare, 1998, p. 15). Danny casts a critical eye on this conquest's religious motivations, which also has a Biblical justification:

God didn't promise the Jews Tel Aviv or Haifa. What he promised them was the land of Judaea and Samaria. The justification is in the Bible. In 1967 the Israeli Prime Minister warned the King of Jordan not to join in any Arab attack, so he only had himself to blame when the Israelis moved eastwards to reclaim Biblical lands. The Israelis did not start the Six Day War. It was forced upon them. It became the greatest victory in Jewish history. (Hare, 1998, p. 15)

Similarly, the other character of the text, Sarah, says, "[t]he Lord promised us the Land, but he never promised it was going to be easy. You don't come to Israel if you think it's going to be easy. You may not be religious, but actually you need deep reserves of faith" (Hare, 1998, p. 15). Sarah, like the others, believes the conquest is motivated by religious reasons and justifies the necropolitical state of Palestine with the "two-thousand-year spiritual yearning to go home" (Hare, 1998, p. 23). Israelis believe that the lands they have conquered are the holy lands that God has promised them. As a result, they are opposed to reaching an agreement with Palestine underlying the fact that:

Two hundred and sixty people killed since Oslo, thousands injured and all because we made an accommodation with an alliance of terrorists and hoodlums. The more land you give away, the more terrorism there is. Every hectare conceded to the PLO or Islamic Jihad becomes a haven of immunity. What we have to confront is the ominous possibility of encouraging a terrorist state right next door to us. (Hare, 1998, p. 23)

Kelly's work highlights how biopolitical techniques can be used to justify and legitimize imperial practices, and how they can be used to mask the violence and exploitation that often accompany imperial expansion. Accordingly, for some *Via Dolorosa* characters, the Israelis' assumptions justify necropolitical violence in Gaza. But the reality is quite different from these viewpoints. The play continues to show both sides of the coin:

Gaza is an area forty-five kilometres by eight. Even now, one third of it is held by the Israelis, on behalf of just six thousand religious settlers. Around them are crammed three-quarters of a million Palestinians, half of whom live in the refugee camps, which were temporarily established in 1948. (Hare, 1998, p. 25)

This comment refers to the question that Kelly attempts to demonstrate through his concept of biopolitical imperialism. According to Kelly, what occurred in Gaza is:

[a] peculiarly stark case of a ubiquitous global phenomenon I call 'biopolitical imperialism'. Nowhere else in the world is a population kept alive by international aid donations to the extent that the people of Gaza are, although most of the poor populations of the world receive some such consideration. Nowhere else in the world today do the First and the Third Worlds sit so close together, though everywhere they are in direct contact. Nowhere else are the poor so directly oppressed by the rich, though inequality is everywhere inseparable from oppression: nowhere else do the wealthy slaughter the poor so directly. (Kelly, 2015, p. 2-3)

Mbembe is of the same opinion. He believes that the Palestinian experience is satisfactory evidence to demonstrate the postcolonial occupation of disciplinary, biopolitical, and necropolitical forces that gives the colonial authority complete control over the conquered territory's population and enables a mode of killing that does not differentiate between exterior and interior enemies" Mbembe (2019, p. 82). Hare justifies Kelly's and Mbembe's comments in *Via Dolorosa* by depicting

Israelis' thinking style and colonial strategy based on the fact that Palestinians inhabited the lands before Israelis: "All they are doing is using physical facts to establish their presence in the land, and then to treat it as a *fait accompli*" (Hare, 1998, p. 27). But Hare also underlines the issue that today, Israelis are divided into three strict groups: the "hedonistic Israel of Tel Aviv. The austere Israel of Jerusalem. And the mad Israel of Hebron which wants only vengeance and blood" (Hare, 1998, p. 31).

Kelly states that "Israel is unique in that it is the purest illustration of current biopolitical imperialism, in which a Western First World population directly and viciously dehumanizes a Third World people. He goes on to say that Israel is the only current instance of settler colonialism that is still trying to enslave its original population (Kelly, 2015, p. 3). Parallel to this interpretation, one of the subjects of Hare's monologue is also discrimination. Jerusalem is well known as the religious centre for Jews, Christians, and Muslims. However, Muslims do not have the right to go directly to their holy place. Israeli soldiers have imposed a blockade on Jerusalem. Since Arabs do not have the right to visit Jerusalem and "Israel is an extraordinarily raw spot on the body of global imperialism" (Kelly, 2015, p. 3), the subject of Hare's monologue is also discrimination. The playwright draws attention to the checkpoints on the way to the holy land, reminding the audience of the control and necropolitical state power, summarizing Israeli guards' dehumanizing behaviour toward Arab people:

They always ask two questions. Did you pack the bag yourself? Did anyone give you anything to carry? The other day when they asked the first question, I answered and I added, "And no one gave me anything to carry." The Israeli guard looked at me angrily: "How dare you? Don't you know? You are not allowed to answer the second question until I ask it. (Hare, 1998, p. 32).

Hare appears to be referring to contemporary practices of necropolitics that Mbembe mentions. Mbembe states that the construction of walls, fences, barriers, checkpoints, and enclosures everywhere in Palestine are concrete examples of Israel's biopower (Mbembe, 2019, p. 43). Moreover, Israel's necropower and biopolitical control and colonial desire over Palestinian territories also show "modern state, exemplified by the right of the sovereign to kill beyond the law by singling out whose lives count as lives (Fragkou, 2019, p. 68). This situation also in accordance with Kelly's approach: "The lives of Israeli citizens are considered so much more important than those of non-Israeli Palestinians that thousands of the latter can be killed simply to prevent deaths of a handful of the former" (Kelly, 2015, p. 1-2).

Mbembe suggests that the most significant embodiment of necropower today is Israel's colonial colonization of Palestine (Mbembe, 2019, p. 80). In *Via Dolorosa*, Hare reminds the audience of the Holocaust as a historical fact and a present and future reality. In this regard, relating the Holocaust to the question of Palestine, the playwright emphasizes that victims of history can also be perpetrators. In this regard, Hare seems to share the following idea:

Taking a historical perspective, many analysts have argued that, on the one hand, the material premises of the Nazi extermination are also found in colonial imperialism and, on the other, in the serialization of technical mechanisms for putting people to death. (Mbembe, 2019, p. 72)

From this vantage point, it is evident that, as a victim of Nazi annihilation, Israel seems to have transformed itself into an executioner of Palestinians under the guise of religious beliefs by establishing a biopolitical and necropolitical state. Characterised as a play about the question of Palestine, *Via Dolorosa* draws attention to the politics of death in an age where the lines between the victim and perpetrator blur. In this light, it might be argued that Hare's monologue indicates the same kind of horrible reality without openly referring to what happened to Jews during Hitler's regime.

CONCLUSION

The question of Palestine has been one of the most long-standing unsolved problems of international politics. Regarding today's political and theological concerns, the question keeps its importance for the Middle East, the West, and the Muslim world. Since the establishment of the British mandate, Palestinian land has been colonized, and militarily occupied. Furthermore, the Palestinian people are displaced, isolated, and left to die under the harsh conditions of Israelis' unchecked state power. Kelly offers a critical appraisal of the question regarding the biopolitical and imperialist dimensions of the occupation.

Similarly, Mbembe takes it a step further and addresses the question of the capacity to kill and let to live. Mbembe grounds his necropolitics argument in the context of the current colonial dominance of Israel too. What occurred in Gaza is both catastrophic and a typical example of biopolitical imperialism and necropolitics. Based on Kelly and Mbembe's theories, Hare's *Via Dolorosa* is a notable illustration of biopolitical imperialism and necropolitics exposed by the Israeli government. The author's goal throughout the play is to criticize the global powers' dualist, untrustworthy, deceitful, and dangerous politics. Hare highlights the necessity for a reasonable strategy to address the question of Palestine while attempting to highlight Israel's biopolitical imperialist and necropolitical techniques. The dramatist shows Israel's necropolitical dominance over Palestine while calling attention to the current situation of Palestinians. Hare seems to support Kelly and Mbembe's statements in *Via Dolorosa* by portraying Israelis' colonial tactics, predicated on the notion that Palestinians inhabited the land before Israelis. Considering the importance of Jerusalem as a sacred center for Jews, Christians, and Muslims, Hare directs the audience's attention to checkpoints in Jerusalem, reminding them of the control and necropolitical state power of Israelis. Hare's *Via Dolorosa* also informs the audience of the Holocaust as both a historical event and a current and future reality. In this sense, the dramatist highlights that victims of history may sometimes be perpetrators by linking the Holocaust to the Palestinian dilemma. In this regard, Hare seems to believe that as a victim of Nazi destruction, Israel appears to have converted itself into an executioner of Palestinians under the pretext of religious convictions by building a biopolitical and necropolitical state. Thus, the occupation of Palestine by Israelis, Palestinian resistance, and the dreadful nature of closure, displacement, and dehumanization are all reflected in *Via Dolorosa* as examples of biopolitical imperialism and necropolitics.

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