



BOOK SYMPOSIUM ON *HOME RULE: NATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY
AND THE SEPARATION OF NATIVES AND MIGRANTS BY
NANDITA SHARMA*

Can Liberation Be National?

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As Fanon memorably argues, the project of national liberation in Africa was hijacked by an “acquisitive, voracious, and ambitious petty caste, dominated by a small-time racketeer mentality, content with the dividends paid out by the former colonial power” (2004 [1961]: 119). He repeatedly describes the national bourgeoisie in newly decolonizing countries using this term: *caste*. This class, claiming to lead the liberation struggle, turns out to mimic its recently departed colonial overlords. Riding on the fumes of this struggle, they constantly invoke the needs of a “national economy” for legitimacy, though this turns out to benefit the leadership caste alone, rather than the masses. Insulated from the people, this caste becomes ever more self-enclosed, selecting nepotism over democracy, and crony capitalism over redistribution in any substantive sense.



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Nandita Sharma's *Home Rule* deepens this narrative, interrogating the failure of national liberation projects to amount to anything approximating liberation. But for her, the problem is not just that the emergent leadership group remains out of touch with the masses; rather, it is that *national* liberation can never be liberation at all. Inherent in the national form, she argues, is a project of containment—even a case of cruel optimism in Lauren Berlant's (2011) sense, in which the desire for *national* liberation becomes an obstacle to people's own flourishing. As people dream of liberation, their postcolonial rulers answer their calls for decolonization with demands for national sovereignty—which amount to nothing more than the “*economic autochthonization* of both capital and the proletariat” (Sharma 2020: 145). Developmentalism becomes the new mantra, enabling new rounds of dispossession in the name of an amorphous national identity. To be clear, this is not a strategy of deception in Sharma's account, but a truly hegemonic one. A feeling of belonging to a national society becomes deeply rooted, with nationals actively investing themselves in this sense of national identity.

Of course, nationalism is an inherently exclusivist ideology, but Sharma goes further: all nationalisms are inherently racist. Arbitrary political separations are actively misrepresented as the natural spatial order of sovereignty (Sharma 2020), articulated variously in terms of national culture, national identity, and most perniciously, national blood. People become *of* a place, part of a “supposedly homogeneous and unified nation” (Sharma 2020: 243). This sense of belonging is not forced onto the broader population at gunpoint but articulated in terms of national pride, which is continuously reinscribed as the proper site of national liberation. It is through this process that hegemony operates, concealing, masking, whitewashing, and containing (all words Sharma deploys) demands for full decolonization. Citizens become actively invested in their national identities, defining their own status as “natives” over and against “migrants,” who postcolonial leaders blame for the unrealized promise of liberation. If decolonization was articulated as the expulsion of foreign occupiers, postcolonial migrants are imagined as a subsequent wave of foreign occupation, a recolonization of sorts—and therefore as an obstacle to national liberation. In other words, “liberation” in this telling entails the homogenization of a population tied to a bounded territory; and citizens come to *demand* this state-driven purification project, even going so far as to carry it out themselves.

This is what happened, for example, in post-apartheid South Africa. In May 2008, 62 people were killed in xenophobic attacks. Resurgent violence seven years later in Johannesburg prompted multiple African countries to repatriate “their” citizens. In 2019, attacks on Nigerians drove more than 600 from the country. And late last year, South Africans marched on other African embassies in Pretoria under the banner “Put South Africa First,” demanding the expulsion of migrants. What was behind this sudden violence in the “new” South Africa, which purported to be a “rainbow nation”? As Michael Neocosmos (2008) has argued, the post-apartheid state reduced citizenship to indigeneity, with the government attributing climbing unemployment and prolonged economic stagnation to the influx of immigrants from neighboring countries. This produced a “state-structured xenophobia” (Neocosmos 2008: 17) that interpellated South African citizens as rightful inhabitants wronged by migrants who had come to steal their jobs. Mediated by popular politics, this meant

the demonization of all migrants, whether they were petty shopkeepers, miners, or even unemployed altogether. When in 2010, the police chief of South Africa's wealthiest province attributed the bulk of criminality to undocumented immigrants, who he wrongly claimed comprised over a quarter of Gauteng's population, he found an echo in the broader population, nearly two-thirds of whom believed that immigrants were more responsible for crime than other groups (Tamir and Budiman 2019). "Migrants," as Sharma puts it, "were proffered as an explanation to Nationals for why their nation-states failed to deliver jobs and prosperity for them" (Sharma 2020: 19). Through this nexus of state and popular politics, migrants were racialized and rendered deportable. This in turn produced a precarious class of workers denied what she calls a "mobility premium" (Sharma 2020: 165), thereby cheapening their labor-power. Or as Harsha Walia has put it even more recently, "Border governance... produces bodies 'deemed available for injury' and perpetual debilitation as a form of racial class control" (Walia 2021: 78).

From Indirect-Rule Colonialism to the Postcolonial New World Order

Ultimately then, *Home Rule* is a book about racial capitalism: how nationalism, which is always a racist nationalism, institutionalizes difference to create a viable infrastructure for sustained capital accumulation. This viability is not only about immediate profitability but also concerns the preemptive containment of emancipatory alternatives, narrowing demands for liberation into demands for *national* liberation—which turns out not to be liberation at all. Of course, this was not always the case. Sharma (2020) begins the book with an account of indirect-rule colonialism, which faced its ultimate test with the Indian Revolt of 1857. In response, the British altered their approach, exchanging their project of "civilizing" the native ruling class for recognition of native difference. The British began to represent their occupation of the Subcontinent as providing protection for native culture(s), which, following Mamdani (2012), were progressively differentiated, exaggerated, and codified. Native culture soon became native cultures, disaggregating a potentially singular anticolonial identity into an archipelago of reservations. This was particularly pronounced in settler colonies. During this period, we can observe, for example, the creation of tribal reservations in the United States and Canada, and native reserves in South Africa.

Each "tribe" was accorded its proper place, and it was through this process that nationalism was born. In other words, "Nationalism drew upon and intensified the biopolitical demographics organized by practices of indirect-rule colonialism by institutionalizing the association between a People (the 'nation') and a place (territory) within the state form itself" (Sharma 2020: 61). Thus, Sharma's story is not that of a total shift, but of the germination of the seeds of postcolonial nationalism under imperial rule. Mamdani puts the point succinctly: "Nationalism did not precede colonialism. Nor was colonialism the highest or the final stage in the making of a nation. The two were co-constituted" (Mamdani 2020: 2).

It was under imperial rule that "a global proletariat was made" (Sharma 2020: 86). Colonial powers simultaneously fixed "natives" in place while facilitating the mass relocation of

populations they would subsequently define as “migrants,” regulating movement in order to control labor markets. But this was not only about cheap labor-power; it also concerned counterinsurgency. By bifurcating the workforce into natives and migrants, the former came to be seen as properly emplaced, whereas the latter were represented as in competition with a “rightful” labor force. While native workers shared more in common with migrant workers than with native elites, the fostering of identitarian nationalisms prevented this solidarity from developing. Instead, the working class remained fragmented, natives and migrants at each other’s throats.

The relationship between a nationalized People and its territory was institutionalized through the creation of immigration controls in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the interwar period, the world saw the introduction of entry controls for the first time. Colonial powers had sought to maximize their populations, only regulating exit from a fixed territory. But entry controls did something quite different, formally “territorializing political membership, societal belonging, and, crucially, state-granted rights along highly racialized lines” (Sharma 2020: 98). The converse of this process was the rendering of migrants as allochthons, or people out of place, cheapening their labor-power and ensuring they could not access rights in the same way as natives.

Following World War II, anticolonial movements swept Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean, expelling European powers. While this process is typically read as a liberatory struggle, Sharma complicates this narrative by demonstrating how postcolonial governments further entrenched the system of home rule, “wherein state control over territory and people was deployed in the name of the ‘nation’” (Sharma 2020: 116). This was the birth of what she terms the Postcolonial New World Order (PNWO), a system governed through augmented and competing nationalisms. Postcolonial governments represented the project of decolonization in terms of developmentalist discourse, which promised to both remedy the wrongs wrought by colonialism and turn capital into a tool for national self-determination. In other words, decolonization was rearticulated as a project of *national* development, in which “liberation” was determined by the vitality of the national economy rather than the material wellbeing of a country’s popular masses.

This is the sense in which the PNWO was a project of coopting demands for authentic self-determination. But the agents of this containment are not who we might expect. National liberation states were not pawns of neoimperial or neocolonial powers – both terms Sharma detests insofar as they absolve postcolonial governments of any blame, reducing them to victims. The problem is not that northern capital straightforwardly dominates a southern proletariat. Rather, this relationship is mediated by so-called national liberation governments, which actively “elevat[e]...Nativeness or indigeneity to a first principle” (Sharma 2020: 160), reinforcing the distinction between autochthonous natives and allochthonous migrants. To put the same point differently, the project of self-proclaimed national liberation turns out to have nothing to do with decolonization. Instead, postcolonial governments assume the imperial mantle, continuing the project of dividing and ruling their populations.

What is more, national liberation turns out to be a patently racist project. Within each nation-state, citizenship and immigration categories differentiate the workforce. The wage is itself nationalized, with a premium guaranteed for National-Native workers. Emigration becomes a

means of exteriorizing both poverty and political challenges. Meanwhile, racialized immigration policies normalize the subordination of migrant labor, ranging from guest worker programs to the regulation of “undesirable” migrants. Sharma reiterates that this was hardly limited to the reactionary autocracies of the Persian Gulf or Asia’s larger economies; even African national liberation governments devised “extensive categories of ‘prohibited’ or ‘undesirable’ Migrants, as well as a long list of offenses for which Migrants could be deported, often without trial” (Sharma 2020: 176).

To be clear, “postcolonial” for Sharma is not a condition limited to former colonies but makes its way back to the metropole. Today, she argues, all governments in the global north—which she aptly terms “Rich World states”—have revived guest worker programs. Meanwhile, formerly colonized populations, who were previously incorporated into European imperial states, now found themselves being expelled from these very territories, defined as migrants out of place. If in the colonial period, “[t]o be European was to *not* be native” (Sharma 2020: 235), the PNWO reversed this formulation. Europeans now claimed native status, which, like all nationalisms, was explicitly racist. Rather than acknowledge demographic shifts at home produced through colonial rule, immigration restrictions were now said to protect national “character,” “culture,” “civilization,” and so forth—all defined in narrowly white supremacist terms. This is what Sharma means when she concludes with a brilliant analogy: “postcolonialism is to colonialism what coolieism was to slavery” (Sharma 2020: 273). By transitioning from slavery to indenture, colonial powers were able to contain demands for liberation while reproducing the material conditions of slavery. The only difference was formal freedom. The same is true for the PNWO. Emancipatory demands are contained, transmuted even, into another iteration of *divide et impera*. The formal rulers change, but the separation of natives and migrants remains the same.

Resisting Nationalism

If nationalism is the chief governmentality of the PNWO, how might it be dismantled? Sharma concludes *Home Rule* by calling for a total rejection of the postcolonial system of nation-states, a “refusal to confuse categories of rulers with the people placed within them” (Sharma 2020: 269). I want to conclude this essay by thinking about the implications of this call to refusal. While I find Sharma’s account of stalled national liberation struggles quite useful in demonstrating their actually existing limits, I admit to some suspicion of the strategic implications of her broad-brush condemnation. Even North American Indigenous self-determination struggles, she argues, reinforce the migrant/native distinction, promoting yet another form of nationalism. But is this a fair characterization? And can we really conflate reactionary national liberation regimes as they emerged in the PNWO with the broader struggle for national liberation? In other words, can liberation ever be national?

A growing chorus suggests that it most certainly can. As Adom Getachew (2019) argues, African and Caribbean proponents of anticolonial liberation reinvented “national” self-determination beyond the nation, recasting it as necessarily internationalist. While I would

certainly side with Sharma's analysis in some cases—Nkrumah immediately comes to mind—I am also wary of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Anticolonial “nationalists” formed novel political, economic, and legal structures that sought to move beyond the nation-form. Likewise, Gary Wilder (2015) argues that Césaire and Senghor promoted decolonization beyond nationalism; much as in Getachew's account, they endorsed continental and even transcontinental federations to realize liberation beyond the confines of the nation-state. In a very different context, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) argues that the realization of Indigenous nationhood, paradoxically, requires the “complete overturning of the nation-state's political formations,” the “creat[ion] of networks of reciprocal resurgent movements” (Simpson 2017: 10).

In all of these accounts, emancipatory thinkers attempt to chart a careful path between the pitfalls of nationalism and the actually existing terrain upon which they must organize. Fanon shared Sharma's distaste for nationalist leaders, denouncing the “party which readily proclaims itself national, which claims to speak in the name of the people as a whole” as an “ethnic dictatorship” (Fanon 2004 [1961]: 126). Yet he also insisted that any effective anticolonial party “must be the direct expression of the masses” (Fanon 2004 [1961]: 130), and this means remaining in direct contact with the broader subaltern population. Insofar as these masses exist in a world of nations, nationalism becomes the common sense of liberatory thought.¹ It is the task of radical intellectuals to develop this thinking into good sense, as Gramsci put it, going *beyond* the national form.² And indeed, it is precisely for this reason that anticolonial and communist thinkers alike devised unstable concepts intended to self-destruct, conceived in a nationalist idiom but designed to explode it. Thus Gramsci wrote of the need to develop the “national-popular collective will towards the realisation of a superior, total form of modern civilisation” (Gramsci [1933–1934] 1971: 133). Cabral ([1970] 1979) advocated the development of a “national culture,” but not from on high; rather, like Fanon, he sought to foster a common idiom of liberation among the masses, which could cohere nationally only to go beyond the nation-form. And in Fanon's formulation, nationalism must “very quickly turn into a social and political consciousness, into humanism [or else] it leads to a dead end” (Fanon [1961] 2004: 144). As Ato Sekyi-Otu (1996) reads Fanon, “national consciousness” is altogether distinct from nationalism; the former will develop into the latter in the hands of the national bourgeoisie, but it is the task of radical intellectuals to foster national consciousness as it already exists into a revolutionary consciousness going beyond the national form.

All of this is to say that a blanket rejection of both nationalism *and* national consciousness risks leaving the world as it actually exists in the rearview mirror as we soar toward the realm of ideas. I certainly agree with Sharma that discussion of “blood quantum” or reduction of migration

¹ As Gillian Hart (2014) puts this point, “In addition to embodying a critique of imperialism and racism, national consciousness for Fanon was a unifying force, essential to bridging rural-urban, racial, ethnic, regional and other divisions produced or reinforced by colonialism. In other words, national consciousness contains important elements of critical common sense forged in the struggle against colonialism—and that is why it cannot be bypassed in any effort to constitute collective forces capable of superseding post-colonial passive revolution.” (Hart 2014: 166)

² On Fanon as Gramscian, see Burawoy (2003, 2021), Hart (2014), and Sekyi-Otu (1996).

to colonialism is antithetical to any emancipatory project and must be widely condemned. But I do think we risk formulating an abstract, universalist solution to a set of concrete, particular problems when we refuse to engage the conceptual worlds in which people actually think. This was Gramsci, Fanon, and Cabral's project: systematically working to develop existing understandings of the world into forms that could exceed that world.

My disagreement with Sharma's approach then turns less around her analysis than the strategic implications she draws from it. I share her disdain for borders and hope my grandchildren can read about them in a museum one day. But how do we foster a mass movement of radical anti-nationalists when we live in a world of nations in which national belonging is a dominant form of self-identification? Perhaps Fanon and company are wrong, and national consciousness always develops into nationalism so long as our productive relations remain capitalist. But I do think it is worth identifying the rational kernel in liberation movements, even when this gets overshadowed by the ambition of the national bourgeoisie and their organic intellectuals. As Gramsci put the point, "it is not a question of introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone's individual life, but of renovating and making 'critical' an already existing activity" (Gramsci 1971: 331-332). In the context of the struggle for decolonization, what is this "already existing activity" if not the forms of national consciousness that most strive for full liberation?

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