



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

## Rethinking Decolonization

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With the issue of migration at its core, Nandita Sharma's *Home Rule: National Sovereignty and the Separation of Natives and Migrants* (2020) seeks to address large, profound questions: What characterizes the extreme levels of inequality and immiseration across the globe? How are such inequalities produced and sustained, within and across nation-states? Why were national liberation movements/Third World nationalisms unable to deliver on the promise of decolonization? How should we understand decolonization and what would it mean to work toward it? What relations can we chart between the recent rise of nativist, far-right movements in Europe and the mid-twentieth-century policy and politics of "self-determination," enshrined in the UN charter? Sharma argues that at the heart of our global system of inequality is not only a capitalist economic system;



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more specifically, it is a capitalist system that has come to be organized in and through a national state system, where states are understood as representatives of, and responsible to, only their putative nationals. Sharma calls the current arrangement of the world—that emerged with the dissolution of an imperial world order, particularly following the national liberation movements across Asia and Africa in the mid-twentieth century—the Postcolonial New World Order. In Sharma’s account, this world order is distinguished by the division of humanity into Natives (or Nationals) and Migrants; or autochthons and allochthons; or “people of a place” and “people out of place” (Sharma 2020: 4). Sharma nuances this typology by charting the mechanisms through which “Natives,” in sites such as white settler colonies, are further divided into Indigenous National-Natives (or First Nations or Aboriginal) and White National-Natives. Thus, at the heart of the immiseration and violence that plagues our world is the deadly compact between nationalism and capitalism, a compact that is constantly being remade as new, more genuine, more authentic Natives (or Nationals) emerge, often on the backs of forced displacements and literal genocidal violence (Sharma provides a long, sobering list of examples of such displacements and genocides from across the world).

To make her argument, Sharma takes us on remarkable historical journey that tracks the transformation of the racialized European/Native duality that structured colonial-imperial rule, to the equally—if differently—racialized Native/Migrant duality, that structures the contemporary world. The latter duality, Native/Migrant, has ironically resulted in the long-pejorative category of “native” being embraced by white nationalists in Europe itself. The terms of each duality are not innocent descriptors or natural categories (though they are largely mobilized to appear as such). Rather, they are *political* categories, and are thus imbued with, conduits for, and reflective of power relations. Sharma attends to the various forms this Native/Migrant duality takes at different sites, covering a spectrum of colonial-imperial histories that shaped diverse national states—including white settler colonies, colonies in Asia and Africa, colonial formations in Latin America, and, last but not least, in Europe, the site of the metropolises. The combination of the historical approach she mobilizes, the global geographical scope of her exploration, and her engagement with an astonishing array of scholarship, makes for very compelling argument. Sharma’s systematic, meticulous analysis patiently builds the case, chapter-by-chapter, to accumulate the evidence for the Native/Migrant duality as the fundamental ruling relation of our times.

It might be tempting to cast Sharma’s framing of Native/Migrant as a reductive Manichean typology. But much like other important Manichean framings (e.g., Fanon’s colonizer/colonized or Said’s Occident/Orient) it is striking—and, quite frankly, surprising—how apposite it is for understanding the organization of the world. Sharma demonstrates how appealing to the national, and finding or producing authentic Natives, make possible the constant deferral of decolonization at all sites, including erstwhile colonies and erstwhile metropolises. Or, as she writes, the “failure to achieve decolonization is a failure of the national form in which liberation has been imagined” (Sharma 2020: 34). Importantly, for Sharma, a substantive “decolonization” is radically different from the mere substitution of the Native for the European as the ruling elite—as occurred with so many national liberation movements. Sharma argues that the ruse that nationalism propagates is

an understanding of “the national people,” as constituting a horizontal camaraderie that transcends difference, even as what is produced and how lives are lived is structured by deep vertical divisions, notably around class, but also around other axes of difference that can be justified via appeals to the distinctiveness of “national culture.” Within the context of global capitalism, national states do the work of generating profoundly uneven internal and external labor markets, by maintaining divisions between and within “national labor markets.” Moreover, she shows that, around the globe, the legal criteria for who is included in a given “national people” have become increasingly restrictive, making for a shrinking pool of eligible national members. Statelessness is thus a chronic, and intensifying, condition of our present.

Sharma does not shy away from proposing a path out of the global quagmire—produced by the nexus between nationalism, global capitalism, and the Postcolonial New World Order—in which we find ourselves. With a politics of “no borders” at its heart, Sharma envisions a future that is configured around tending to the commons, which rejects the prison house of national identity, the immiserating politics of national states, the romanticization of national liberation, and the vilification of migrants.

I read Sharma’s *Home Rule* with deep interest and find her arguments powerful and provocative. In the remainder of my comments, I briefly reflect on three such provocations. First, returning to what I have called the Manichean typology Sharma offers, I wish to think about all that must be remaindered out of the analysis she provides. In doing so, I address both the value and the limits of Sharma’s analysis. Second, I turn to what is a controversial aspect of her argument in *Home Rule* and in earlier work (Sharma and Wright 2009): whether it is justified, or productive, to include struggles of Indigenous communities in white settler colonies as an instance of the national thinking she deplors. Third, and finally, I address her provocation to rethink decolonization which, of course, entails that we also rethink colonization.

I noted above that while Sharma’s typology of Native/Migrant can be understood as a reductive Manichean typology, it is striking how accurately it describes the organization of our world. This is the strength of her analysis: the typology provides an overarching conceptual rubric that helps us apprehend events in diverse sites as broadly similar, produced via similar mechanisms and logics, and articulated to each other through processes of path-dependence and through the workings of global capitalism, which depends upon and exploits national and sub-national divisions. But while this is the case, the difficulty comes in providing the Native/Migrant duality as the *only* structuring relation in the world. All other relations are subsumed within this meta-relation—as parts of, or causes of, or consequences of, or reflections of this relation. In Sharma’s telling, not only forms of *political* community, but *all* forms of human association and community have been completely captured by nationhood. In this account, what happens to other forms of community that live alongside, inside, and separate from dominant understandings of the national? There are a multiplicity of life-worlds and formations of human association that are not, and cannot, be contained by national thinking. Thus, in my view, the book needed to leave more room for others to build upon and accommodate all that the book must foreclose. In a certain way, it is almost because the avalanche of evidence provided is so damning that we are encouraged to not

think outside its terms—even as niggling doubts remain. Doubts that come from the too-neat totality of Sharma’s argument. There are complex worlds that people inhabit—both humane and inhumane; both those one might wish to nurture and those one might wish would wither away—that are not cannibalized by, or a subset of, national thinking. In other words, in my view, Sharma’s argument would have been enhanced by a richer, more complex understanding of culture and of human associations.

This point is directly related to the second provocation I noted above: whether it is justified, or productive, to include struggles of Indigenous communities in white settler colonies as an instance of the national thinking Sharma deplors. Often, those who take issue with Sharma do so not through a direct engagement with her argument, but by stating that she is cherry picking. Had she only read more widely, such critics aver, it would have been evident that the tendency she discerns is unwarranted. They thus suggest additional sources, that should have been included and that, presumably, would have changed the argument. My reading diverges from this position: Like every serious scholar, there is no doubt that Sharma assembles evidence that supports her claim. From the evidence she provides (and that we too might collate), it is clear that influential strands of Indigenous scholarship and practice in white settler colonies *do* mobilize the language of Native-ness and authenticity, and make claims on this basis, in the same terms that it has been/is used elsewhere, often with disastrous consequences. Even as Sharma details the overlaps and strong similarities that inform national thinking and produce similar logics of autochthony across varied sites, she is careful to also outline the stark differences: most notably that, to use her terminology, Indigenous National-Natives in white settler colonies generally have “no hold on the dominant structures of any of these nation-states,” unlike White National-Natives (Sharma 2020: 244). Sharma’s unequivocal position is that stringent critiques of and opposition to the often deplorable and oppressive conditions of Indigenous peoples are urgent and necessary. Her argument, however, seeks to elucidate how nationalism, national identity, and notions of self-determination have, indeed, become a dominant basis of making claims and to sketch the profound limits of politics that sees decolonization as national sovereignty. Unlike some other readers, I am persuaded by Sharma’s argument and, acknowledging this, think this aspect of Sharma’s work is best read as a cautionary tale. However, the strands of thinking and practice she foregrounds—those that are configured around Native-ness, authenticity, and the national—while very significant, do not exhaust the terms and kinds of struggles in which Indigenous communities (and their allies) are engaged, let alone describe how Indigenous lives are lived and communities (trans)formed and sustained. Hence, once again, leaving space for the complexity of human worlds in the argument—which is distinct from changing the argument to propose something different—would have helped further strengthen the contributions of the book. Indeed, an attention to such worlds and such struggles is precisely what could serve as a resource for the kind of decolonization Sharma envisions.

Thus, let me turn, finally, to Sharma’s argument regarding substantive decolonization, rather than the decolonization of states—with the latter referenced in the title of book, “home rule,” the rallying cry for national liberation movements. Such movements, Sharma demonstrates, were

premised on the notion of “self-determination” that, while having a long and complex history, was given a particular institutional and legal form in the UN Charter as, specifically, *national* self-determination. The legitimacy that has accrued to this notion is a critical part of the story of why many struggles against forms of (state) power—including those styling themselves as anticolonial/decolonial movements—revert, time and again, to voicing their demands as a demand for national self-determination. Every demand for “self-determination” requires, at a minimum, the distinction of the “self” from “others,” and thus demands criteria of membership, of inclusion and exclusion. Different iterations of the Native/Migrant duality, Sharma argues, have become the *sine qua non* for such criteria of inclusion/exclusion. As she writes: “The continuing significance of movements for ‘national self-determination,’ both in extant nation-states and in movements for new national sovereigns, has left us with an understanding of colonialism as nothing more than ‘foreign rule.’ Consequently, decolonization has become nothing more than ‘home rule’—the elevation of National-Natives over Migrants” (Sharma 2020: 274). In contrast to this eviscerated view of colonialization and decolonization, Sharma urges a different analysis and, thus, a different conclusion: one that does not understand colonization as merely the identification of “foreigners” and of decolonization as merely their eviction or demotion. She invites us, instead, to think of colonization as easily perpetrated by fellow nationals (as is routinely the case today), and of decolonization in capacious, non-national terms. With such an analysis at our disposal, we would be better situated to work toward a world not content with the “wages of nationalism,” as compensating for the depredations that characterize lives across the world. For, much like the “wages of whiteness,” the wages of nationalism are a strategy of co-opting and thwarting the possibilities of human solidarity and of human freedom.<sup>1</sup>

Sharma provides a rough outline for what she sees as a way forward that, as I noted above, rejects different forms of national thinking and works toward what she calls “a decolonized commons.” Central to Sharma’s vision is “a liberatory politics of ‘no borders’” (Sharma 2020: 276). This entails “dismantling the borders between people categorized either as National-Natives or as Migrants” (Sharma 2020: 276); “disidentify[ing] with being National Citizens” (Sharma 2020: 282); and conceiving decolonization as an expansion of the commons with “the ability to enjoy a livelihood on it *without exclusion*” (Sharma 2020: 282, emphasis in original). One does not need to agree with the specifics of Sharma’s proposals to recognize this as another major strength of the work. For, the deeper point here is to incite us to forgo our investments in national thinking and national identity and risk cultivating forms of imagination, of practice, and of politics

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<sup>1</sup> Sharma elucidates on the “nationalization of the wage,” wherein “national” workers receive a wage higher than “migrant” workers (Sharma 2020: 276). Using an analogy with what W.E. B. Dubois ([1935] 1971) called the “wages of whiteness,” we can append to her analysis the “psychological wage” that national workers receive. This “psychological wage” operates in several ways: For instance, it works both *within* national settings (not only distinguishing nationals from migrants but also distinguishing between gradations of national subjects—for example, along lines of race, caste, or gender) and also *across* national settings (by naturalizing why wages differ across nation-states and producing the idea that “our” jobs are being relocated elsewhere). In addition, the psychological wage of nationalism also helps to compensate for the lack of a wage at all, for it can help redirect the frustrations of under- or un-employment toward a rabid nationalism.

that can work toward a substantive decolonization. In my estimation, much academic work has become risk-averse, preferring to not ask difficult questions or to propose difficult answers (or to relegate such meditations to footnotes). It was thus invigorating to read Sharma's *Home Rule* and engage with bold and provocative arguments that press us to think in fresh and imaginative ways.

In this brief commentary, I have only been able to provide a cursory engagement with elements of Sharma's argument; the persuasiveness of the book lies in the structure of the argument and in the weight of the evidence it provides. As such, it needs to be read in its entirety.

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