



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

**Beyond Sovereignty  
Building Other Worlds**

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Nandita Sharma's *Home Rule: National Sovereignty and the Separation of Natives and Migrants* (2020) is a provocative book that challenges prevailing conceptions of sovereignty at their core. Notions of belonging and national liberation are out the door, jettisoned by detailed accounts of the entanglements among imperialism, national liberation, and anti-immigrant politics now. The argument is expansive, the geographic and historical range daunting, the research and scholarly literatures engaged incredible. Sovereignty is dissected with exquisite skill. That sovereignty and bordering are reinforcing processes is not surprising, but the ways Sharma extends the entanglements, the ways in which she traces the political consequences, takes us into uncharted territory. For Sharma, contemporary anti-immigrant politics currently manifest around the globe



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should not be seen as a new phenomenon forged by right wing governments maneuvering for political advantage. For Sharma, anti-immigrant politics have their roots in conceptions of sovereignty, territory, and Home Rule. Extricating ourselves from the Faustian bargain in which the political authority for some is secured by positioning others “out of place” requires nothing short of rebuilding the world as we know it. Opening up new political possibilities is the central ambition of the book.

Sharma sums up the argument elegantly early in the conclusion:

More and more, we demand unscalable walls to further enclose ourselves within “national homelands.” Yet, until we take into account what we have lost by demanding sovereignty for National-Natives and recognize what we have lost by centering on the glory of the “nation” instead of the world’s builders, we will not realize decolonization. This book, then, is not a lament for imperialism; it is a dirge for nationalism. Only after the death of the national liberation project can we renew our commitment to decolonization. (Sharma 2020: 276)

Perhaps the most surprising twist comes in Sharma’s powerful critique of indigenous politics elaborated directly in Chapter 8. Drawing on a wide array of cases, Sharma argues that the linking of sovereignty and territory hails those who embrace nationalism into an anti-immigrant politics that limits the political horizons of all. National Natives, for Sharma, come in many forms: National Liberation States, Europeans, and White settler colonies all have invoked National-Native identifications of various inflections. But it is the extension of this argument to Indigenous peoples, to First Nations, that pushes the argument into more controversial territory (Sharma 2020). I return to this aspect of the argument under the discussion of land below.

After finishing *Home Rule*, your head might spin; certainly, you will not be able to think indigeneity, sovereignty, and migration in the same way again. Off-hand references to the Peace of Westphalia, or boundaries and belonging, each of which appear with considerable regularity in academic discussions and media outlets, are shown to be woefully inadequate; they gloss the pernicious politics in which the articulation of sovereignty with territory necessarily positions those who move as not belonging. Sharma convincingly embeds sovereignty in the long, violent history of imperialism, colonialism, and what Sharma calls the Post Colonial New World Order. There are generative echoes between Sharma’s argument and Jasbir Puar’s (2007) powerful analysis of homonationalism; both are alert to the subtle ways in which apparently radical subjectivities can attach to pernicious forms of nationalism (Puar 2007). That nationalism is problematic is not new; that progressive political projects have been swept unwittingly into its wake still needs to be documented. Sharma takes on this task and offers a provocative rereading of the Postcolonial New World Order in general and of National Natives in particular.

Sharma bookends the central historical chapters with accounts of imaginatively other worlds. The introduction, anticipated by the fabulous Bruegel cover, draws on the biblical story of the Tower of Babel to posit a world beyond sovereignty’s circuits of power. The very first page offers a capacious view of political possibilities—other worlds animate the book. The book ends with an equally wonderful discussion of “Struggles for a Decolonized Common,” in which Sharma

anticipates a world ahead. I would love the account of the “postseparation” politics to have continued as it offers an important horizon for the project. Perhaps my wish might be fulfilled in Sharma’s next book. *Home Rule* thus offers glimpses of other worlds while before descending into the central chapters of the book into the claustrophobic Postcolonial New World Order.

*Home Rule* is not a quick or easy read, but the payoffs are significant. In order to extend the discussion, I raise a series of questions clustered around three conceptual issues: order, imagination, and land.

### Order

Order, or perhaps more accurately, political order is central to *Home Rule*. After all, identifying and finding ways to dismantle the Postcolonial New World Order is one of the ambitions of the project. Powerful as the macro-historical analysis is, I find myself wondering about the analytics of the term order itself. Throughout the central chapters, Sharma conveys the ways in which the different elements of the political formation reinforce each other. The sense of a closed system is intense. This is, in part, what makes the book so powerful. And yet, once I put the book down, once I could escape the centripetal pull of the text itself, I found myself wondering if the world is ever so effectively articulated one part to another. Nations; political parties; institutions; are not so orderly I think. There are always fissures within. My thinking on institutional order has been influenced deeply by Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek’s long engagement with these questions that is captured in part in their influential essay, “Beyond the Iconography of Order” (Orren and Skowronek 1994). On their telling, orders are always heterogeneous things in which aspects of states are formed and carried forth across multiple time horizons. The inter-currents, convergences, and conflicts are carried within unsynchronized histories of states and their parts. Order, for them, has little analytic purchase. Adam Sheingate (2003) and Gary Herrigel (2007) extend the argument from nation states to organizations and firms: both see institutions as fields of both power and creative action. Claims to authority are rarely complete; structures, hierarchies, and rules never fully delimiting. I would love to get a better sense of Sharma’s conception of order: why that term? To be sure, the political formations she analyses are complex and operate at a massive geographic and temporal scale. And yet, for the analysis to hold, the coherence of the form, the ability of the order to hold, has to outweigh its disorderly interior.

What happens to the overarching argument of the book, I want to ask Sharma, if the pieces within do not cohere? What if, rather than order, the fragments or elements are loosely arranged; might they be more readily reconfigured? What, in short, is at stake in the term order? What if we think of sovereignty as a political formation, an assemblage, or as a series of patches? How do the range of political possibilities shift along with a shift in terms? As I read Sharma, there are two registers of order at work in the text: on the one hand, the imperial-postcolonial histories are portrayed as powerful forces; as orders that have endured with enormously pernicious effects. There is weight and a locked-in character to the dynamics Sharma traces. And yet, the book’s introduction and conclusion animate more open conceptions of politics: other worlds are possible.

Indeed, the whole thrust of the book is premised on the notion that orders can be changed. I am very sympathetic to that position and wonder whether there might be ways of allowing multiple worlds to live more fully throughout the book. This is no small matter; one cannot just sprinkle a little openness here and there. There is a delicate balance between the demands of conveying the weight of the past, the weight of the regimes she wants to document, and the sense of political possibility as always present. As the text now stands, I think Sharma resolves this tension structurally in the book's architecture: possibilities are located in the beginning and end, in the introduction and conclusion, while historical lock-ins are fleshed out in the middle chapters. I wonder whether it might have been possible to resolve the tension analytically rather than spatially by allowing possibilities to permeate all of the chapters rather than relegating to the opening and closing chapters. This brings me to my second question concerning political imagination.

### **Imagination**

Another way to put the question of order is to ask where political imagination resides for Sharma? The architecture of the book tends to place it beyond the everyday work of political life. Generative imaginaries are located in the introduction and conclusion leaving the substantive middle chapters to document the weight of imperial, colonial, and Postcolonial New World Orders. To be sure, by opening the book with the Tower of Babel in some sense establishes the book's ambition to recapture other worldly possibilities, but there also is a way in which the Tower undercuts the ability to locate openings within. By beginning the book this way, the wellsprings of creativity are positioned in a mythic space or in the transformed order held out as a future possibility. There is little attention to disorderliness, or imaginative possibilities within. The decision to capitalize the Postcolonial New World Order underscores the point; the capitals give order a coherence, force, and formality.

It is worth distinguishing the way in which Sharma signals political imagination in the introduction and conclusion from each other as each opens up the political somewhat differently. While the introduction locates imagination in the realm of the mythic, the conclusion brings imaginative possibilities back to earth. Decolonizing the commons is not an otherworldly project for Sharma; it is very much located in the here and now. For many years, Gaye Chan and Sharma (n.d.) have pursued fantastic small-scale projects pushing the question of the commons. I am thinking particularly of their various "eating in public" projects that they have hosted in a variety of forms and places (Chan and Sharma nd).<sup>1</sup> Politics, in these collaborative projects are not just a matter of mobilization, resistance, and opposition. They are in some vital way about the always present capacity to reimagine. Eating in public, the free store and other experimental projects are expansive. Where Cornelius Castoriadis (1997, 2007) holds out for instituting social imaginary as foundational, as constituting radical imaginaries, many artists, activists, and scholars consider the

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<sup>1</sup> Chan and Sharma have been held eating in public events for many years. I have heard them speak about the project at the New School and participated in a Diggers' Dinner on zoom on May 15, 2021

role of imagination in a more pervasive, but no less powerful, light. For example, Jill Richards fabulous book, *The Fury Archives: Female Citizenship, Human Rights, and the International Avant-Gardes* (2020), rethinks citizenship, human rights, and the international Avant-Gardes by reconnecting imagination and politics by explicitly moving back and forth between the fiction and daily politics. Or consider Eve Ewing's poem, "proof [dear Phillis]" (2019) which captures the unsteady relation between fact and fiction, past and present specifically in relation to Phillis Wheatly. Similarly, Miriam Ticktin, Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, and myself (forthcoming 2021) have considered both separately and in conversation the inter-twining of imagination and materiality.

The issue might be posed then as to when and where the imaginative enters. *Home Rule*, aligns Sharma more closely with Castoriadis (1997, 2007) while eating in public clearly locates the imaginary in the everyday. I suppose one might pursue both tracks, but for the most part, texts lean one way or the other. Although Castoriadis has been an enormously influential figure and has done much to bring questions of imagination into theories of the political, I see little to be gained by establishing a threshold of the radical. Why is that needed? Is that in fact how the worlds change?

### Land

My final concerns cluster around questions of land and relations to it. I am completely in agreement with Sharma in her thorough-going critique of nationalism and notions of belonging; I too reject such political identifications. And yet, I find my self drawn in somewhat contradictory ways to the physicality of a place; do these identifications also have to be relinquished? Is it possible to distinguishing more carefully between somatic relations to place and nationalist expressions of such attachments? If we dispense with sovereignty, what happens to affective attachments to topography? Can such attachments be reworked into some other de-nationalized forms? Might I still feel a quickening as I fly over the long, flat, ground in Australia, without immediately being hailed into the white settler colonialist politics there? I am genuinely unsure of the political possibilities here. Can somatic attachments be reworked in ways that create political space for those attachments or are they necessarily tied to possession and belonging?

Sharma offers a powerful reframing of National Natives that lingers after finishing the book. What are the implications of Sharma's argument for land acknowledgements now? Are all such acknowledgments equally entangled with territory and sovereignty? Are there better and worse ways to make such claims? There is no entry for land acknowledgements in the index, but from the line of argument in the book as a whole, I assume Sharma would see such acknowledgements as another instance of National Nativist politics. Given the growing acceptance of land acknowledgements, I would like Sharma to have engaged this question directly and at length as it sits at the cross-hairs of her argument. Perhaps Kevin Bruyneel's influential book, *The Third Space of Sovereignty* (2007), offers some ways of holding open a wider range of politics than binary oppositions between belonging or not. Bruyneel, like Sharma, sees sovereignty as a trap, but argues

for alternative political identifications that refuse traditional notions of sovereignty without relinquishing a claim to collective identifications altogether. He wants a “third space.” I fully expect Sharma would not find Bruyneel’s position compelling, but I would like to have heard why. The issue is not so much that Bruyneel’s argument itself needs to have been engaged, as Sharma already takes on an enormous range of scholarly work. Rather it is the question of whether collective identifications around territory might be differently figured. Put differently, how do attachments to place, to topography, figure in the decolonized commons?

On several occasions, Sharma refers to “builders” when describing various political formations past and present. It is worth spotlighting the notion of specificity; the act of building in its specificity and imaginative dimensions carries within it precisely the generative and reorientation capacities that Sharma and I both are after. The term caught my eye on page 281, but I had begun to notice it on several occasions earlier in the text. It is a great term: builders get to shape things, certainly not under conditions of their own choosing. We are hailed, but can respond variously to specific conditions. Sharma knows this all too well and specifically acknowledges variability across the many cases she explores in the book. Indeed, the point of the book is to provoke a political engagement that might lead to building other worlds—especially for Sharma building a “decolonized commons” through the doing of quite specific things. At times the creative acts of doing, of building, get buried underneath the weight of larger social and political forces. I am left wanting a more explicit analytics of the creative act of building itself. It is already there, but I want Sharma to give it more physical and analytic space so that it—the text—and we can push back more forcefully on the weight of the past.

*Home Rule* is an important book. It is a bold challenge to the deepest foundations of our politics now. Whether you agree with Sharma or not, it needs to be read and its contentions engaged. I look forward to carrying the conversations forward.

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