
Reviewed by Hanno Brankamp

The unrelenting tide of xenophobic, racist and nationalist politics around the world would make Nandita Sharma’s book *Home Rule: National Sovereignty and the Separation of Natives and Migrants* a necessary read at any given point in time. However, reading the text at the juncture of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, the perseverance of neo-fascist and right-wing regimes, in the midst of capital-driven global ecocide and continuing struggles of migrants, refugees and people on the move for mobility rights, it strikes a particularly resonant chord. *Home Rule* is a radical, ambitious and impassionate critique of nationalism and the ideologies of nativism that haunt our political present and have appeared recently in the guises of “vaccine nationalism” and, at its deadliest, “vaccine apartheid.” While Sharma’s book precedes these developments, it helps us to understand their long durée by tracing the historical roots of what she identifies as the “new religion of nationalism,” and thereby raises urgent questions about belonging, political community, sovereignty, mobility and the nature of decolonization itself. The book intervenes critically in recent debates that have sought to portray nationalism as an anti-colonial ideology. These views try to reconcile the contradiction between liberatory nationalisms in the Global South and more overtly predatory nationalisms within Euro-America (see, for example, Larmer and Lecocq 2018). *Home Rule* rejects this differentiation and instead makes the fight against all nationalist ideologies the condition of true liberation.

Chapter 1 opens, rather poetically, by retelling the biblical story of the tower of Babel, a painting of which also adorns the cover. In the aftermath of the great deluge, the tower and its builders symbolized a purposeful communion of human-kind which threatened to breach the border between heaven and earth by daring to imagine—against God’s wishes—a “heaven on earth” of their own design. Borders and higher authorities’ willingness to enforce them, the book reminds us here, are as ancient as the collective desires by humans to subvert and rethink them “from below.” This mythico-historical account serves as the backdrop against which the book develops its Foucauldian-inspired reading of the birth of nationalism. Nandita Sharma’s main argument is that promises of national liberation and self-determination after empire have failed. Instead of breaking with racialized and sedentary logics of colonialism, the *Postcolonial New World Order* was cut from the same cloth, still categorizing populations as “Natives” with territorial claims of belonging or as “migrants” relegated to positions of interlopers. Yet while in
colonial times the settler-as-migrant was elevated to the status of “civilized” citizen—which colonized “natives” could barely hope to achieve—the postcolonial order inverted those logics and reimagined the category of the “national” as the only marker of legitimate belonging.

The book is voluminous, slow-moving and dense, but its analyses are as razor-sharp, illuminating and well-researched as Sharma’s wider work. Chapters 1–3 trace the colonial roots of contemporary nativism that has become key to national formations across the world. Sharma here engages with Mahmood Mamdani, whose work on indirect colonial rule and the divisions between “native” subjects and “settler” citizens evidently influence much of her thinking on territorialized belonging in the colonies. Curiously, any reference to Mamdani’s arguably most influential book *Citizen and Subject*—in which he develops his analysis of “native authorities,” the domain of the “customary” versus the “civil” and the dualism of the colonial administration most fully—is missing. Nonetheless, Sharma skillfully demonstrates in the same spirit that in the colonial order of things, being “native” was conceived as a naturalized state of belonging and fixity which existed in opposition to migrant-settlers whose being in but not of the colony was taken as a mark of civilizational superiority. Indirect rule, Sharma argues, is therefore a direct precursor to the later logics of national sovereignty and self-determination. Upon gaining independence, the racialized geography of indirect rule was flipped, now casting “natives” as the legitimate citizens and custodians of postcolonial states and “migrants” as their illegitimate others. I appreciated that the book here fields a highly nuanced and complex argument that is cognizant of the differences between the white settler colonies and other postcolonial societies but retains an incisive critique of both. Post-empire, there is a reterritorialization of power. Nations as pivots of sovereign power readily adopted the colonial discourses on “nativeness,” “autochthony,” and thus inhibited rather than advanced decolonization by fostering reactionary dreams of a national future.

Chapter 4 provides a historical account of the globalization of nationalist immigration policies that continue to curtail human mobilities. The chapter covers vast ground from early twentieth-century population exchanges, minority politics, the birth of the modern migration and refugee regimes up to the Second World War. Chapter 5 shows how in the 1960s, national self-determination became not only the rallying cry of colonized peoples against foreign European rule but also a building block of the postcolonial world order. This explains, according to Sharma, that decolonization became synonymous with freeing one’s society of “foreign” rule rather than also addressing material and political forms of domination and exploitation that persisted after independence. Sharma provocatively suggests that both the Soviet Bloc and Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) were as complicit in upholding the hegemony of nationalism as postcolonial governmentality par excellence as the United Nations, World Bank or the
IMF. The logic of nationalism was therefore internalized by capitalist, communist and non-aligned states alike, usually benefitting national elites. Chapter 6 continues this line of argumentation and unpacks in more detail how postcolonial schemes for development and especially the Washington Consensus entrenched calls for more rather than less nationalism as a panacea for the economic ills of former colonies. However, here the book risks conflating vastly different trajectories and historical junctures, reducing them all equally to perpetuating the nation-state model. Kwame Nkrumah’s work on “neo-colonialism” is deployed as a case in point, citing his invocation of “foreign” intervention as a threat to African sovereignty to illustrate the extent to which nationalist thinking pervades even the most progressive-looking movements. Yet the broader currents of Pan-Africanism are largely overlooked, not least Nkrumah’s own calls for dissolving the continent’s nation-states into a unitary African state, or Julius Nyerere’s rivalling aspirations for a gradual process of unification that effectively blurred the otherwise sharp lines of national exclusionism. Chapter 7 completes the historical arc of the book and brings us to the present day with a discussion of tightened immigration policies and restrictions in the late twentieth century. This is further developed in the following chapter with great nuance and care, highlighting that context matters in discussion of autochthony, drawing on examples of Indigenous politics in Bolivia, the US and Canada. This is perhaps also where the argument is at its most provocative, namely when it concludes that Indigenous claims to “nationhood” are inadvertently reproducing rather than challenging the postcolonial order, although this is crucially a mechanism of survival in a world shaped by white supremacy and settler colonialism. Importantly, Nandita Sharma closes the circle of her argument about the inversion of the native/migrant divide here, demonstrating that national “natives” have been refashioned as the new colonized and migrants as their unlikely colonizers, a common trope that is virtually on constant repeat in populist anti-migrant discourses in Euro-America and beyond.

Overall, the book masterfully illustrates the malleability of the national imaginary over space and time, rightfully cautioning us of uncritically embracing liberatory projects that may well strengthen rather than undo systems of exclusion. While the book offers copious amounts of “big picture” debates alongside historical detail, I would have appreciated more room being given to the perspectives of “migrants” and “natives” themselves, who are at the receiving end of said processes of subjectivation (and subjection). In the end, Home Rule concludes on an invigorating and hopeful note, making it a fervent anti-nationalist opus for our time. It urges us to engage in a radical politics of postseparation by abolishing borders, nations and resolving the artificial contradiction between “migrants” and “natives” so that we may forge a new earthly commons shared by all.

_Hanno Brankamp, Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford._
References
