



Labor, nature, and the reproduction of capitalism: an exchange on subjection and emancipation

Inés Valdez, *Democracy and Empire: Labor, Nature, and the Reproduction of Capitalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

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To rule anti-imperially and ecologically

Democracy and Empire: Labor, Nature, and the Reproduction of Capitalism contains in the title five concepts that could, on their own, be the subject of a full monograph. The reason I instead theorize them together is the core argument of the book: that we can only properly conceptualize them by grappling with their entangled operation, which together amounts to the politics of global imperial capitalism. *Democracy and Empire* argues that democratic moments of enfranchisement in western countries took place while these countries were empires, which infused these movements with a democratic will that was materially entangled with a demand for imperial wealth. This suffused democratic feeling with

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possessive attachments that dictated a form of excessive rule I call self-and-other-determination, i.e., inward-looking self-determination, but also outward-looking despotic authority that jointly authorized the extraction of both labor and natural resources in colonial locales. These imperial democracies worked alongside capitalist accumulation and reproduction, though not without tensions, and set up systems of global rule sustained and advanced by the racialization of groups that provided the intensively exploited labor that extracted natural resources and processed them.

A racialized form of alienation was at work at both ends of this political relation, with techno-racism playing a mediating role. On the one hand, citizens in the industrial world declared themselves and their high-tech way of life superior to and independent from nature. On the other hand, colonial subjects were alienated from the ability to orient their intercourse with nature toward their needs, to instead engage in strenuous work to extract natural resources to feed humans and machines in the metropole. This account traces ecological devastation to these twin forms of alienation, which politically enable a racial mode of capitalist accumulation.

In addition to colonialism, the imperial control of labor and its mobility was foundational for this structure and for ‘solving’ crises of accumulation by expelling excess labor from metropolises; transporting enslaved people to work the mines and the land when Indigenous groups had perished of forced labor, had been violently exterminated, or had been displaced; and bringing Indian, Chinese, and Indigenous Mexican laborers to replenish the supply of unfree labor post-emancipation. This historical conceptualization recasts migration as a world historical force whose national control entailed the absorption of imperial labor control-functions rather than constituting a function inherent to territorial states. This illuminates the foundational role of restriction and control of racialized migrants to imperial democracies in the west.

This picture recasts the backlash against migration as a demand to restore an imperial arrangement that keeps racialized others subject to superexploitation either outside or within. This posits anti-immigrant backlash as neither a reasonable reaction to the crisis of liberal democracy, nor ultimately grounded in democracies’ right to control borders. Instead, it shows that anti-immigrant discourse and policy-making aims to maintain historical modes of racialized labor control that protect the well-being of the privileged at the expense of exploited racialized others.

This global regime of capitalist extraction, while sustained by the imperial democratic projects outlined above, was ultimately an oligarchic project that, after decolonization, brought together elites in the metropole and the (post)colony. The third part of the book diagnoses this condition and lays out an account of political responsibility that locates citizens of wealthy countries as beneficiaries of a system that depends on crushing revolutionary hopes of colonial countries the world over. Centering the discussion around the U.S. colonial war in Vietnam, chapter 5 theorizes anti-colonial popular sovereignty, augmented by an ecological account conceptualized in the conclusion. These two amendments are required by popular sovereignty’s excesses and insufficiencies. Popular sovereignty does too much by presuming that imperial wealth extracted despotically is up for the taking by wealthy polities, but



it also does too little by leaving out of politics the dependence of collective life on reciprocal relations with land and nature.

The contributors to this Critical Exchange encourage further reflection on the character of domination I theorize, including by clarifying the book's commitment to a tragic or dialectical account of domination (Nichols) and specifying the reach of privilege enabled by imperial domination and the appropriateness of the people as the subject of emancipation (McKean). Leach, on the other hand, contests the adequacy of expanding social reproduction toward productive labor and decentering women's role in social reproduction. Kelly, finally, reflects on alternative modes theorizing the ecological limits to the imperial democratic way of life.

The question of tragedy v. dialectics refers to the view of domination being an inevitable (sometimes ontological) or a historical, contradictory and mutable feature of the world. The tragic account 'offer[s] little by way of an account of social transformation' except through the moral motivation of the powerful to 'deny their own self-interest' (Nichols). The dialectic account, in contrast, makes evident the power of those oppressed (given the dependency of the privileged on their exploitation) and may even contain a view of social transformation that, being universally appealing, brings freedom to the oppressor (Nichols). McKean is also interested the political role of the privileged when he claims that a good number of white working-class groups were merely 'subjected to [different] systems of labor control' and could be allies. By reaching out toward these groups, racialized workers could realize (in the double sense of understanding and implementing) the power given to them by the dependency of the privileged on their labor. Leach's critique of my expansion of social reproduction toward tasks performed by racialized men gets at similar issues. Such expansion, Leach argues, risks collapsing class differences among women, thus, obscuring the 'commonalities between Mexican women who perform care labor (in Mexico or the U.S.) and working-class women who perform similar work.' Once this is taken into account, Leach argues, it becomes evident that only 'middle- and upper-class white families (who can afford nannies and maids)' benefit from this system. This opens the door to potential 'solidarity between racialized migrant laborers and diverse working-class citizens' (Leach).

Kelly focuses on the potential paths out of domination that can be opened by 'a new humanist vocabulary of ... enlightenment, and reason' that incorporates the ecological limits to the affluence that underpins 'mainstream notions of Anglo-American freedom.' Such a rethinking would reshape understandings of the good life and the attachments that underpin it, as Nichols suggests, which could support a broad-based coalition against the ecologically destructive and dehumanizing bent of the imperial capitalist formations that historically became tethered to democracy.

On the question of tragedy and dialectics, *Democracy and Empire* falls squarely in the second camp by highlighting the instability of projects of domination, the partial liberation and new search for populations to subject, and the constant resort to coercion required to sustain imperial arrangements. It explains that racism facilitated the turn of the white working class away from anti-capitalist toward accommodationist struggles, which exchanged a family wage for the deactivation of its more radical demands. This labor-capital alliance, fastened by racism, predicated the gradual incorporation of white labor in the early twentieth century on the



subjection of non-white groups through a variety of means (slavery, colonialism, non-white migration restriction, land dispossession, etc.). This process shaped western democracies into imperial structures of governance, whereas political relations were infused with possessive attachments and predicated on the despotic rule of others overseas. Yet this arrangement was not devoid of tensions, notably because the capitalist promise of the family wage was only ever aspirational for a majority of the white working class. While the white working class was exempted from the most toilsome labor and most extreme exploitation reserved for racialized others, the resistance of the latter and the continuity of labor struggles suggested the inherent instability of the capital-white labor alliance.

Unlike other works, mentioned by Nichols that theorize the *political* dependence of the west on settler and extractive colonialism and slavery, *Democracy and Empire* theorizes politics alongside the capitalist reproduction it enables, thus illuminating the specific rationale for domination and the opportunities for resistance alike. As my reading of King's and Fanon's accounts of Vietnam make evident, global anti-colonialism entailed the realization by colonial peoples of the power they accrued by sustaining the world of affluence. While King openly denounced the use of military force to protect U.S. investments abroad and the conscription of working-class Americans to this imperialist project, Fanon stated that the colonized realized that Europe itself was their creation, and that Europe's wealth their wealth (pp. 180, 189-190). In these moments, imperial democracy reveals its shaky foundations in the continuous need for states, financial institutions and/or intellectuals to intervene, use force, repress, and restate narratives of legitimation to save capitalism.

Thus, on McKean's question about Vietnam's relevance for today despite failed anti-imperialist projects, three points apply. First, engaging with this moment reminds us of the connections between violent conflict and political economy. This requires a critique of war as part of contemporary imperial capitalism rather than tragic frameworks that ground imperial violence on a self-standing account of race or civilization discourses. Instead, it is necessary to locate military action in the context of empire as a structure that exceeds the war moment. The growing attention to racial capitalism in political theory may be one indication that at least in the academic realm there is an opening in this direction. Second, it is important to theorize anti-colonial politics with close attention to the role of post-colonial elites as minor partners of imperial capitalism—as King and Fanon (Valdez, 2023, chapter 5) and the tradition of Marxist dependency theory did in the 1960s and 70s—to understand the resilience of global structures of domination (Antunes de Oliveira, 2024; Valdez, 2024a, forthcoming). Here again attention to political economy is key—again departing from the predominant focus of the political theory of empire on civilizational and racial narratives and the politics of domination as if operating independently from imperial capitalism. Third, the failure of anti-imperialist movements ought to also alert us to the extent of force and repression deployed domestically and globally to quell these movements, speaking to both the instability of imperial domination and the contradictions of capitalism.

A pivot in this direction highlights that, after colonialism, the authoritarianisms of the 1970s in the Third World gradually inaugurated the structural adjustment programs that would augment the IMF stabilization programs already in place



and characterize the decades to follow. Behind 'stabilization' and 'adjustment' new racialized narratives of corrupt, disordered, and violent states blamed for the poverty and inequality of their countries (Valdez, 2023, pp. 48–54). *Democracy and Empire* refocuses the discussion on the role of global capitalism in the continuity of super-exploitation of labor and nature, and the resulting disorder and expulsion/emigration of populations. Following the small portion of people on the move that make it to the Anglo-European world takes us full circle to the crisis of capitalism in the global north, where the arrival of racialized migrants unleashes the anger of portions of the white working class and creates the conditions for the contemporary rise of the far-right.

In contrast to presentist accounts of 'backlash' against immigrants that beg the question of why marginalized people on the move are targeted at a moment of increasing concentration of wealth at the top, *Democracy and Empire* offers a historical explanation. I show that mass mobility today, as historically, is produced by the contradictions of imperial oppression, containment, and extraction and serves to fill badly and unreliably paid and insecure jobs. Their visible mobility is evidence of the unsteadiness of the systems of extraction that are supposed to sustain the well-being of the privileged. The 'privileged,' incidentally, only tenuously includes the majority of the white working class, whose well-being was always to some extent aspirational and coexisted with significant labor unrest and repression, and is ever more tenuous for all but a small minority today. McKean and Leach both remark upon this, respectively recalling the violence of labor repression used to break the Homestead Steel Strike or the Pullman Strike, or working-class American women doing the same work as immigrant women.

In his critique, McKean suggests to focus on theorizing laws of exploitation that operate in both racialized and generalized ways. Yet the problem to theorize is why the generality of material conditions nonetheless has white workers turning against racialized others rather than the capitalist system that (differentially) subjects both. *Democracy and Empire* recognizes a heavily gradated but nonetheless continuous capitalist exploitation across differently racialized groups. But it also highlights how this racialized divide has resulted in both material differentiations and an imperial democracy that racially delimits emancipatory politics in a way that cannot be set right merely through a declaration of commonalities. Such declaration, in other words, cannot in and of itself fuel the kind of solidarity and anti-capitalist resistance McKean suggests should obtain.

Moreover, with the aid of racist ideologies, the material differences *are* significant and worth reflecting on. For example, while Leach notes that only upper-middle class families benefit from nannies and other service workers, a much larger group benefits from the exploited labor of migrant cooks, roofers, and gig delivery workers. While the labor of social reproduction at home remains unpaid domestic labor performed predominantly by women, the privatization of some reproductive work through the growing service sector means that racialized men also perform this work and do so in non-formally-waged conditions too. The fact that this work is so cheap and exploitative is precisely why it can be privatized, so it seems odd to stop worrying about the conditions of the work that facilitates social reproduction as soon as it is performed in a different space and by different subjects. These convergences



are acknowledged by social reproduction feminists, who emphasize the elasticity of social reproduction by noting that workers in sectors with ‘low wages, absence of any job security and high “flexibility”’ are ‘like housewives’ (Mies, 1998, p. 16).

More broadly, the traditional division of labor within households is itself disrupted by the conscription of racialized subjects, requiring children and men in families separated by transnational feminized migration or deportation to step up to do this work too. Moreover, the relegation of racialized workers to the most strenuous jobs, as present employment patterns and *Democracy and Empire*’s historical reconstruction show (Valdez, 2023, 153, 156), relieves white workers from exhaustion in ways that are caring and nurturing by omission. In other words, social reproductive labor amounts to *both* feminized labor predominantly performed by mothers, wives, and birthing individuals *and* tasks that contribute to others’ social reproduction functions (regardless of who performs it). Conceding the transformed modes of provision of social reproductive work and condemning the super-exploitation of men who work as cooks, roofers, and gig workers, should not get in the way of acknowledging biologically reproductive work or encouraging coalition-making with white working-class women, unless the latter are unwilling to apprehend and condemn the difference that racialization makes for the experiences of labor of men and women of color.

Ultimately, my point is not to deny the experience of exploitation among non-racialized working class groups, but to highlight the rupture in the commonality of the experience of exploitation and the misdirection of resistance against exploitation and vulnerability toward racialized others. Returning to the dialectics of a contradiction-ridden capitalist system, the aspiration of the exploited to appropriate imperial gains rather than join forces with the racialized, and to deride the migrant worker rather than recognize the common subjection to capitalism, is a huge political loss. This is why the contemporary crisis of capitalist legitimation does not turn those affected by precarity against capitalism in its global shape but instead returns to the racialized demand for protection, which explains the growth of anti-immigrant forces all around the western world (Valdez, 2023, pp. 56–57, 87–91; 2024b). In other words, moments of instability and contradiction, while they exist, require overcoming the imperial orientation of democracies and its white citizens if they are to become moments of genuine emancipation and transformation in which the challenge is redirected away from racialized others and toward capitalist elites.

Mapping this imperial structure does not deny the possibility of joint political action, at which both McKean and Leach hint, but rather clarifies the hard work of building coalitions that could counter reactionary divisions. *Democracy and Empire* reveals that a turn toward broader coalitions, while possible, requires doing away with progressive projects that cater to domestic groups while maintaining migrant super-exploitation and furthering corporate interests abroad. This means that--to Nichols’s question about *why* the historical dependence on a constitutive outside is a problem--allowing free reign to capitalism among racialized groups domestically and in the global south only strengthens capitalists’ clout and emboldens them as adversaries of democratic projects narrow and wide (Valdez, 2024b). Thus, for all but a few ultra-wealthy elites, the world that



imperial capitalism created is potentially or actually destructive of communal relations, bodily health, and environmental safety. For everyone, capitalism posits ideals of excessive consumption, hyper-policed spaces of leisure, and increasingly disembodied modes of living, all states with a debatable connection to a purposive life.

This brings me to the politics of transformation and to addressing McKean's objection to the language of popular sovereignty and Kelly's call for a new humanist vocabulary of enlightenment and reason to grapple with the ravages of capitalism. McKean asks: why not gesture toward a 'politics' that is anti-imperial and ecological, echoing David Temin's reading of Indigenous anti-colonial practices that 'disentangle ... self-determination from state sovereignty' rather than my own 'anti-imperial ecological popular sovereignty' (McKean). I am sympathetic to this inclination because the re-theorization of popular sovereignty I offer rejects a tethering to a *state* sovereignty that obscures how self-determination is predicated on the exploitative rule of racialized others (chapter 1). My account of popular sovereignty, as McKean notes, entails a descriptive account of people's self-understanding, a practice of rule that is less inclusive than that self-understanding, and an imagined form of popular rule that can overcome the shortcomings of the first two meanings.

But what is crucial to the second sense of popular sovereignty is that it centers its material foundations and recasts imperial popular sovereignty as a capitalist form of rule. This provides critical tools for its recasting in an anti-imperial and ecological form that forces it, and our politics, 'to be more overtly ecological' (Kelly, 2019). A key redirection demanded by an ecological popular sovereignty is that of society's resources toward the fulfillment of human needs in agreement with the regenerative use of nature. This must necessarily push against the sovereignty of the imperial but must also rule, in a sovereign manner, over capitalism as a system. Capitalism must be undone for a positive project of rule that protects land and labor from their violent conscription into accumulation projects and directs them instead toward human flourishing.

This situation is what Kelly describes as a 'world ... combined in potentially discordant ways' with the planet, a discordance that redirects racialized labor and nature alike toward exhaustion. This redirection, and the forces that capitalism enlists to resist it, requires a mode of authority that can protect land and labor and, thus, exclude actors and activities advancing contradictory goals. To do so, political rule should be both genuinely popular (rather than imperially popular) and attuned to its material underpinnings (rather than oblivious to them, as other conceptions of the people have been).

Inés Valdez

Self-and-other-determination: two models

Democracy and Empire is a remarkably wide-ranging and ambitious book, one that weaves together a diverse array of topics and themes. Valdez brings together work on migration studies; racial capitalism; empire, imperialism, and settler colonialism;



feminist social reproduction theory; and environmental studies in a sophisticated and complex account that reveals their imbrications and interconnections. The gravitational well that draws all these topics and areas of concern into a single field is a core proposition pertaining to the historical and conceptual relationship between democracy and domination in modernity.

In abbreviated form, Valdez argues that modern experiments in democratic popular sovereignty—arising first in western Europe and then spreading globally and championed most vociferously by the white settler-colonial societies that emanated from western Europe (e.g., Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, the United States)—were predicated upon the forcible extraction of material resources (labor, land, natural resources) from the world positioned as their constitutive outside. Every key moment that has been described and experienced by these western powers as great events in their ‘democratization’—think of the abolition of slavery, the expansion of the franchise to women and the working poor, the loosening of immigration restrictions and embrace of multiculturalism—has, in fact, been facilitated by an expanded material plunder of the world ‘outside’ the bounds of the *demos*. Expansion and appropriation of external resources meant these western democracies could diffuse and disarm internal contradictions and tensions related to material inequality by means other than redistributing extant resources since, instead, they could simply expand the pie.

In Valdez’s words, ‘popular sovereignty and self-determination were underpinned by popular claims that demanded collective access to wealth obtained by imperial means and required the exploitation of nonwhite subjects’ (p. 2). This moreover secured ideological commitment to a certain vision of western democracy for insiders and newcomers (including, for instance, waves of immigrants displaced by the upheaval and social disruption this plunder created externally) since the proof of concept was found in its seemingly boundless prosperity. Valdez calls this formation ‘imperial popular sovereignty’ but also formulates the more general problem as ‘self-and-other-determination.’ The core insight here is that the *self*-determination of western democracies has always already been a project of *other*-determination since the internal identity and material infrastructure of the west has literally been purchased with the blood, sweat, tears, of those beyond its bounds. The resulting form of popular imperial sovereignty, Valdez reminds us, ‘is not an aberration but the single most prevalent regime in the western world’ (8).

Valdez provides a novel formulation of this problem, and she has the forensic evidence. *Democracy and Empire* is replete with examples—historical and contemporary—that both illustrate the general claims and provide verification for them. Still, in its most general form, the thesis of self-and-other-determination is a familiar one, something we find in other thinkers and key works. This does not diminish the force of Valdez’s formulation, but rather provides further confirmation of the thesis. In recent years, Libby Anker’s *Ugly Freedoms* (2021), Joel Olson’s *The Abolition of White Democracy* (2004), and Aziz Rana’s *Two Faces of American Freedom* (2010) all offer similar arguments, albeit in a more limited context. Those works are largely confined to the United States, but likewise contend that the internal stability and identity of (U.S.) democracy is structurally dependent upon the subordination and exploitation of those taken to be external to it. Stated at the highest level of



generality, this idea is in fact central to a whole host of work in feminist, Marxist, anti-colonial, and critical race theory. Indeed, so widespread is the acceptance and use of this basic idea that one wonders if the consensus papers over contradictions and disagreement. Let me parse two distinct lineages of self-and-other-determination, highlighting some relevant differences between them.

At the heart of the thesis regarding self-and-other-determination is the intuitive notion that freedom and equality for some has been paid for with unfreedom and inequality for others. Even if true, a lot hinges on the mechanics of this process and its normative implications. It matters a great deal why and how this relation has been formed, which has consequences for its eventual critique and transformation. There are (at least) two rival interpretive frameworks that would draw upon some notion of self-and-other-determination but take it in entirely different directions. The first of these is what I call a tragic approach.

There are many thinkers in the history of political thought who would admit that the freedom of some requires the unfreedom of others. But they would add that, while this might be unfortunate, it is insurmountable. Indeed, this is central to many classical theories of democracy. Aristotle comes most immediately to mind. In *Politics*, Aristotle famously argues that full democratic citizenship is demanding: it has both internal and external conditions of possibility. Inwardly, citizens must possess the capacities that are intrinsic to self-rule, qualities such as reason and language. If there are persons or entities that entirely lack reason and/or communicative capacity, they cannot 'take turns at ruling and being ruled' (Aristotle, 1998, p. 21, 1259b) and are therefore ineligible for citizenship (in democracy or any other regime).

More than this, however, full democratic citizenship has outward conditions of possibility. Citizens need things like time and security to participate in ruling effectively. They need to be kept safe from immediate danger and emancipated from the continuous toil necessary for the material reproduction of the community. Accordingly, for some to be engaged in the administration of justice, others need to be soldiers, farmers, craftsmen, mothers, and slaves. On this view then, political freedom has a 'tragic structure,' in that the self-determination of free and equal citizens in the inner sphere of democracy is necessarily predicated upon denial of the same to others.

The thinker most associated with this idea in the twentieth century is Hannah Arendt. Arendt argues that modern projects to overcome the tragic structure of freedom have failed catastrophically, even on their own terms. This is because modern critics of this ancient form have sought to universalize the inner realm of freedom by making all responsible for the material reproduction of society. Schemes that aim for more equitable distribution of the labor of, say, social reproduction have the opposite of their intended effect. Instead of expanding the realm of freedom, they generalize the condition of unfreedom by making us all slaves to necessity. One hears such a concern in, for instance, Arendt's criticism of socialist revolutionary movements:

The liberation of the laborers in the initial stages of the Industrial Revolution was indeed to some extent contradictory: it had liberated them from their masters only to put them under a stronger taskmaster, their daily needs and wants,



the force, in other words, with which necessity drives and compels men and which is more compelling than violence (Arendt, 1965, p. 57).

Accordingly, Arendt advises that we acknowledge that the tragic structure of freedom cannot be overcome without destroying freedom altogether. Moreover, from her perspective, it simply won't do to point out that the tragic structure of freedom has been defended in an obviously pernicious way, say, by proponents of *Herrenvolk* democracy who conflate the distinction between inner freedom and outer necessity with ethno-racial divisions, or advocates of patriarchal democracy (brilliantly dissected in Carole Pateman (1988)'s *Sexual Contract*), in which the relevant distinction is overlaid by gender and sexual difference. Such a critique would (rightly) point out that the wrong kind of distinction has been made—one that is arbitrary and not logically related to the actual practice of democratic citizenship—but would leave unresolved the question of whether *some distinction* is nevertheless necessary.

The seemingly obvious response to arguments of this sort is that while some need to be unfree in order that others be free, the distribution of persons into one category or another need not be permanent. It could be temporary: I could take on the labor of material reproduction while you participate in the administration of justice for some period, then we could switch out. Such an arrangement would prevent the distinctions from becoming too fixed or stable but, one must notice, it still preserves the general claim: for some to be free, others must be unfree, even if assignment into one category or the other rotates. Put differently, it is constitutively impossible to universalize a condition of freedom. We cannot all be free, at least not all at the same time.

An alternative approach to the question of self-and-other-determination is dialectical. On this view, relationships of domination are, in an important sense, contradictory. In such relationships, those in a position of subordination, on the one hand, are negated subjectively in the sense that their identity, selfhood, and will are denied expression or full realization. On the other hand, however, these same people are also affirmed objectively, in the sense that their labor, skills, talents, and capacities are mobilized and are more directly necessary for the material reproduction of the relationship as a whole. This general idea finds expression, most famously, in Hegel's dialectic of *Herrschaft und Knechtschaft*, and in Marx's account of the relationship between the bourgeoisie and proletariat. But it also resonates with many feminist accounts of the paradoxes of patriarchal rule, in which women are denied full expression of their will and agency even as they are conscripted into the social reproduction and care work necessary for human societies to function. This dimension of feminist accounts of social reproductive work is referenced in Valdez's book, especially in chapter 3, when she raises concern with the fact that, in countries such as the United States, the 'pursuit of historically evolving models of heteropatriarchal family depends on nurturing and care by disposable brown workers' (p. 95).

The more prominent example, however, is found in anti-colonial critique. In at least one very prominent and influential strand of anti-colonial theory and praxis in the twentieth century, the overarching relationship of domination that characterizes the rule of the global north over the global south exhibits the relevant



contradictory quality insofar as the latter is likewise said to be conscripted into the material reproduction of the former. Examples of such an argument can be found in Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*—which might also have been titled *How Africa Developed Europe*—or in Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, where he succinctly declared, 'Europe is literally the creation of the Third World' (Fanon, 2004 [1961], p. 58).

This dialectical account differs from the tragic one in many ways, which can only be gestured at here. Three are worth highlighting. First, when we view such hierarchical relationships in this way, it becomes less clear who is really dependent upon whom. Consider the following passage from *Democracy and Empire*:

The ability of race to take on new meanings works alongside new forms of domination that continue western well-being's dependence on the extraction of other peoples' land and labor. We know that, for decolonized countries, 'independence' means incorporation into a regime that re-creates dependency through the need to take debt in foreign currency while specializing in volatile agricultural exports, their dependence on foreign ownership of natural resources, and their limited space of maneuver given western countries' control of financial institutions and stewardship of their multinational corporations (p. 47).

Notice that in this section, the dependency is explicitly said to flow in both directions. Western well-being is dependent upon external extraction, while non-Western countries are dependent upon foreign capital and stewardship. So there is a kind of mutual, albeit asymmetrical, dependency.

If true, then a second claim follows: the initial step to overcoming such relationships of domination is for the subordinate party to 'realize' their paradoxical status. In the above example, the subordinate party may be 'powerless' in the sense of direction and control, but they are 'powerful' in the sense of being the conduit of material reproduction. Therefore, becoming aware of this contradictory structure of power is core to the project of overthrowing domination, because subordinate parties need to understand that they possess more power than the ideologically distorted picture that has been given to them by the dominant suggests.

This kind of argument is associated with twentieth-century revolutionary movements, especially what used to be called 'consciousness raising' activity, but it too boasts a long provenance. Across myriad differences in various movements, the general aim in this tradition is not to empower the subordinate party (at least not in the sense of equipping them with something they don't already have). Rather, it is simply to get them to realize that they already possess all the power that is necessary to overthrow the relationship of domination.

A third claim that might follow from this approach is the least intuitive and most controversial, namely, that it is also in the self-interest of the dominant party to abolish the hierarchical relationship. This derives from the position, mentioned above, that the dominant party is also in a position of pathological dependency. Masters, lords, tyrants, exploiters, and oppressors become pathologically dependent upon their subordinates, needing them for their material survival and the subjective affirmation of their (supposed) superiority. This is a prominent theme in antiquity, of



course, where the tyrant is figured as isolated and alone, friendless, peerless, and thus, beholden to the adoration and affirmation of those he deems to be his lesser (think Book IX of Plato's *Republic*). However, one also finds variations of this in Hegelian-Marxisms of various stripes, in which elites are also said to benefit from the abolition of hierarchy.

This argument is the most controversial because it sounds like we are saying that masters are also harmed by slavery, the bourgeoisie by capitalism, and dictators by despotism. Such an argument is potentially objectionable on moral grounds, insofar as it obscures clear differences between elites and subordinates and their differential responsibility for transforming relations of domination. It moreover may seem obviously wrong on basic empirical grounds: masters, bosses, and tyrants *do* in fact benefit from their position of superiority, and they know it. It is *not* in their self-interest to transform these relations of domination; hence the necessity of force to compel them to change.

In one sense, this objection is correct because it points to real, immediate blockages to realizing relationships of fairness, equality, and mutual reciprocity. On my reading, however, the dialectic tradition stubbornly clings to the notion that domination is self-defeating and contradictory, and that it is even in the self-interest of dominators to abolish oppression. Valdez comes closest to making an argument of this sort in chapter 4 of *Democracy and Empire*. There, she draws upon Du Bois to theorize the interconnected relationship between racial capitalism and ecological collapse, arguing that the 'alienation from nature among citizens from wealthy societies cements colonial constructions of backwardness and underdevelopment and hides the dependency of western standards of living and sustainable environments on the devastation of subjects, communities, and nature overseas' (p. 134).

Notice the hidden threat to wealthy, western societies that is implicit in this claim. Domination and exploitation of the natural world—mediated in and through domination and exploitation of the racialized non-western world—is not merely said to be morally wrong. It is also said to conceal western dependency on unsustainable process of extraction and environmental destruction. The implication is that it is ultimately not even in the self-interest of western powers to propagate this pathologically parasitic form of life.

Of course, turning accounts such as these into plausible arguments requires offering a much-elaborated account of what is meant by 'self-interest.' It demands, at minimum, reframing both 'selfhood' and 'interest' in expanded terms, such that those in positions of relative power and privilege would be able to see themselves as bound up with wider communities and with a long-term or enlarged sense of their own well-being beyond immediate gains at others' expense. One cannot offer such an elaboration here, but hopefully the abbreviated point is sufficiently clear. Obviously, people in positions of domination are better off relative to those in positions of subordination in the present. However, people in positions of domination are worse off relative to where they would be in some alternative egalitarian social order yet to come. This is the promise upon which the dialectical tradition insists: there is universal appeal in transforming relations of domination into a community in which 'the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all' (Marx and Engels, 2002 [1848], p. 244).



I draw out the distinction between the tragic and the dialectic model of thinking through self-and-other-determination, because it seems to me that much contemporary leftist social and political thought—as well as its attending forms of activism—remains fundamentally ambivalent about which of the two models we ought to follow. Of course, almost all such academics and activists would deny any association with the tragic model, and certainly cite more of the key texts that compose the canon of the dialectical tradition. Rhetorically at least, we eschew the tragic model, in which the freedom of some is irrevocably predicated upon the unfreedom of others. Nevertheless, in its excessive moralism and depictions of relations of domination as static dyads, contemporary accounts commonly lack the sensitivity to the paradoxes of power—its contradictions, mutations, and dynamism—that befits classical dialectical thinking. Indeed, moralism and stasis are more commonly invoked.

Much of the work in contemporary leftist academic analysis and social movements has effectively given up on the dialectic tradition of theory and praxis, and instead has adopted the tragic vision (although this is rarely acknowledged explicitly). This comes out firstly in the view that relations of domination are static, stable, immutable and ahistorical—even ‘ontological.’ On this view, such relations are naturalized as identity categories, which can only be affirmed or denounced, never fundamentally changed or transformed. If this is true, then we can give up on the notion of enlisting or conscripting those in positions of relative privilege in the project of universal emancipation. This is not in principle possible.

At the same time, the fatalism of this position is unexpectedly connected to a certain moralistic strand within leftist thought. If we abandon the idea that there is a universal interest in the project of egalitarian emancipation, and embrace the notion that relations of domination are static and stable, then we can offer little by way of an account of social transformation. More specifically, we can give no sense of the motivations that would be necessary to effect change on the part of the powerful. It is clear enough why the dominated would want change, but why would the dominators? Rather than making the case that justice is a realization of the (true) interests of all, non-dialectic accounts are left with the meager hope that the powerful will suppress or deny their own self-interest in the service of moral duty. The project then becomes to push the powerful through empathetic identification with the suffering. This might be compelling for some, but it is a moralistic vision of social transformation rooted in altruism and charity. It is not a political project and contains no vision of a future community in which the freedom of each is dependent upon the freedom of all.

Democracy and Empire brilliantly engages many of these enduring questions. It is clear enough that Valdez sees the internal democracy and freedom of the west as historically dependent upon the material exploitation and domination of its constitutive outside. On this we agree. However, it remains unclear to me precisely *why* this is a problem, and *for whom*. This uncertainty is partially due to the fact that the work speaks through the voices of those ‘outside’ the realm of imperial popular sovereignty, even as it is ultimately addressed to those within. The impetus behind highlighting the perspective of those most harmed by global forces of domination, exploitation, and oppression is clear enough: we can see the reality of our situation more clearly when we view it from their standpoint.



And yet, the addressee of the work is not the migrant care worker, the Indigenous land-defender, or the displaced peasant (all of whom would likely find the general argument to be abundantly clear, even self-evident.) Rather, it hails those of us living ‘inside’ the bounds of imperial popular sovereignty. This is why clarification on the (tragic or dialectical) structure of self-and-other-determination is needed. For a great deal hinges on whether we are being enjoined to transform these relations of domination for others’ sake, as an extension of our moral duty to them; for our own sake, as a realization of our self-interest; or for some future world in which the seeming rigid distinction between these categories would no longer hold sway.

Robert Nichols

Social reproduction and gendered bodily labor in imperial democracies

Democracy and Empire examines the material and discursive articulations of popular sovereignty with imperial racial capitalism, which jointly entail unevenly distributed labor exploitation, ecologically devastating extraction, and cruel migration control systems that dismantle brown families to sustain white democracy and imperial luxury. Sweeping yet exquisitely detailed, *Democracy and Empire* traces these interlocking power relations over a vast geographical and historical range to expose the economic, political, and social injustices beneath western democracies’ imperial popular sovereignty. In particular, Valdez’s concept of ‘self-and-other determination’ (p. 30) exposes how wealthy and powerful countries’ self-governance not only affects poorer and less powerful countries targeted for exploitation and extraction, but indeed, depends on global hierarchies of domination that enrich and empower imperial democracies.

Democracy and Empire is methodologically innovative, developing an approach that reads theory with practice across multiple texts, contexts, archives, and empirical scenes. Valdez explores the ‘material underpinnings of popular sovereignty’ (p. 15) by analyzing the interconnections between global capitalism’s material processes, western discourses of popular sovereignty, and a ‘more expansive archive’ that includes ‘the Black radical tradition, imperial archives, and the historiography of moments when imperial structures smoothly metamorphose into domestically grounded “democratic” regimes’ (p. 7). She reads W.E.B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon alongside the words of British colonial administrators and cultural elites, British and American white labor leaders, and rich histories of racialized labor exploitation targeting Chinese immigrant workers from California to New South Wales, Black and Asian workers in South African mines, and Mexican migrant laborers in the United States.

Analyzing speeches and writings alongside ‘lived practices of rule’ (p. 57), Valdez shows how political theory can engage not only texts but contexts and ‘political formations’ that ‘infuse...political concepts with meaning’ (p. 61). Deftly etching textual and historical details onto an overarching latticework of power relations, *Democracy and Empire* offers a compelling model for doing political theorizing amidst oft-overwhelming complexity. This work demonstrates political theory’s



unique capacity to syncretize a broad range of scholarship in the social sciences and humanities while maintaining coherence through a sharp analytical focus on political ideas—in this case, popular sovereignty—which mobilize and are mobilized by political practices and material structures.

Democracy and Empire also reframes theories of racial capitalism, enhancing their precision without sacrificing the expansiveness that renders them so generative. Valdez conceptualizes racial capitalism as the product of varied articulations of capitalism with historically and racially specific racisms. This allows her to trace dynamic and multifaceted conjunctures of racism and capitalism as they unfold in particular discursive, material, historical, and geographical contexts, while speaking concretely about each conjuncture. For example, she maps histories of racial capitalism and migration across the U.S./Mexico border from the end of the Mexican-American war to the present, showing how economic structures and political discourses on both sides of the border drove migration, labor exploitation, racialization, and ongoing colonialism.

Valdez insightfully observes how these migrants' positioning 'at the intersection of Mexican and U.S. projects of modernization and state-building meant that Mexican migrant laborers were sent to the United States by a domestic project of modernization that positioned them as uncivilized subjects' who would be enriched by American culture, only to find themselves subjected as barracks-dwelling 'peons' limited to 'only the most basic work' after arrival (p. 113). In this way, focusing on articulations sharpens and bolsters theories of racial capitalism without narrowing their scope.

With appreciation for these and *Democracy and Empire's* many other significant contributions, I want to pull on one thread in its tightly woven tapestry of power relations—namely, gender, which is foregrounded in chapter 3. Focusing on Mexican immigrants' and Mexican Americans' role in U.S. social reproduction, this chapter impressively excavates how racial capitalism and imperial popular sovereignty undercut brown families' survival and well-being through coercive migration control regimes. Valdez contends that 'the intersecting effects of racial capitalist projects in Mexico and the United States' produced U.S. social reproduction as materially dependent on the construction of brown families as abject, the coercive exploitation of their labor, 'decimat[ing] their resources for self-care and reproduction' (p. 24). Specifically, she argues that racial capitalism and the white imperial democracies it upholds extract 'nurturing and care' labor from 'disposable brown workers,' rendering 'the provision of social reproduction...part of the mode of rule of popular sovereignty through possessive attachments' (p. 95). Whites' desires for 'comfort' and 'regeneration' constitute a demand for exclusive luxury that deprives brown families of even minimal comfort and the ability to reproduce their own communities (p. 95). This destruction is enacted through family separation, deportability, adultification of brown youth, economic precarity, and depletion of labor/time that could otherwise be invested in brown families and communities.

Detailing these circumstances and exploring their ramifications for brown families' social reproduction is *Democracy and Empire's* first contribution to social reproduction theory (p. 97). The second is 'expanding on the understanding of social reproductive work to encompass productive work that is strenuous and dangerous



and serves to shelter and protect privileged groups' (p. 97). This is not limited to the work of 'nurses, nannies, home aids, and cleaners,' whose pink-collar labor has a more established connection to social reproduction (p. 100). Valdez goes much further by proposing to 'expand the realm of social reproduction to encompass brown men's nominally productive activities in the areas of farm work, construction, and landscaping' as well as mining and meat-packing (pp. 99–100).

This second contribution is, I think, more significant and provocative than *Democracy and Empire* acknowledges. Conceptualizing migrant men's manual labor as part of social reproduction would effectively absorb most productive labor into social reproduction, including wage labor in mines and factories—forms of work traditionally considered paradigmatic examples of productive labor by the industrial proletariat. In other words, this move presents a fundamental challenge to analysis based on the idea of a gendered division of labor as well as essentially collapsing the distinction between production and reproduction, upon which the very concept of 'social reproduction' seems to depend. *Democracy and Empire*'s account of social reproduction, thus, breaks sharply with Louis Althusser (1970) and some Marxist feminists (e.g., Arruzza, 2016). Angela Davis (1981, pp. 225–229), for instance, argues that production and reproduction became materially and ideologically distinct during and after industrialization. Structurally, the home ceased to be a center of profit or goods-production with the demise of cottage industries, while ideologically, the rise of the housewife as a cultural ideal romanticized unpaid care labor.

Of course, challenging the production/reproduction distinction is not unprecedented in feminist scholarship. Stevi Jackson (1999, p. 19), for example, argues that this distinction is 'spurious, nonsensical' because reproduction implies previous production and 'every process of production is simultaneously a process of reproduction.' Somewhat more narrowly, Silvia Federici (2020, p. 3) applies Mario Tronti's social factory analysis to argue that, at a certain stage of development, 'the distinction between society and the factory collapses, so that society becomes a factory and social relations *directly become relations of production*.' Yet while Federici theorizes social reproduction as productive labor, Valdez extends this argument in a fascinating new direction by theorizing productive labor as fundamentally *reproductive*. This move is both promising and perilous.

On the one hand, without the assumption that reproductive labor is a lesser domain of economic activity than capitalist production (because reproduction only perpetuates bare life), the production/reproduction distinction loses relevance. At least nominally, abolishing this distinction would obviate the concept of social reproduction. Yet, on a deeper level, it may enhance social reproduction theory's importance by revealing that feminist analyses of housework and care labor are not merely theories of reproductive labor but theories of labor as such. Applying feminist theories of social reproduction to 'productive' labor is, then, a reasonable extension of Federici's analysis.

Even if Davis observes real material and ideological differences between production and reproduction within (post-)industrial capitalism, she agrees with Federici (2020, pp. 4, 28) that these differences are imposed by and primarily meaningful from the point of view of capital. That contemporary capitalism differentiates between production and reproduction need not imply that theories of liberation



should replicate this distinction. Indeed, refusing to perpetuate it challenges a key capitalist ideological tenet. Perhaps, even if much of political economy must be re-theorized from the ground up after *Democracy and Empire*, the material and conceptual territory historically understood through the production/reproduction distinction could be remapped more usefully through related distinctions (e.g., paid/unpaid, socially necessary vs. socially harmful or superfluous). Doing so would re-frame exploitation and social utility, rather than profit, as central to distinguishing different forms of labor.

On the other hand, abandoning the production/reproduction distinction is not without dangers or drawbacks. First, it risks erasing the specificity of gender oppression, thus, clouding as much as clarifying the relationship between gender, labor, race, and empire. *Democracy and Empire*'s rich analysis is rooted in feminist theories of social reproduction that focus on housework, care labor, and women's dual responsibility for biologically and socially reproducing the workforce. However, these feminist theories emerged through critiques of Marxist social reproduction theories that centrally concerned the role of the wage in reproducing the workforce and capitalist ideology (Althusser, 1970; Federici, 2020, pp. 103–1066). For instance, Federici argues that treating the wage as primary to social reproduction upholds patriarchal-imperial-capitalist conceptions of work that erase women's economically vital unpaid labor, as well as the forced/unpaid labor of enslaved and colonized workers (pp. 26–27). Within feminist theory, social reproduction typically designates a historically feminized sphere of work, understood narrowly as housework or more broadly to include underpaid pink-collar labor. By stripping away the intricate connections between social reproduction and the gendered division of labor, *Democracy and Empire*'s reconception of social reproduction as inclusive of men's manual labor may render gender oppression less visible.

My second concern is that un-gendering social reproduction diminishes the theoretical link between biological and social reproduction—what Federici (2020, p. xiii) calls its 'double character'—thereby further reducing social reproduction theory's analytic leverage against gender oppression. While some of the dirty and exhausting bodily labor of reproduction (p. 100) can be outsourced to hired domestic help, every birthing person performs the reproductive labor of gestation and birth. Without someone, somewhere (usually cis women) performing this biological reproductive labor, new workers cannot be produced and social reproductive processes grind to a halt. Migration reallocates workers geographically, but it does not create them. The reproduction of labor power depends on the unpaid labor of biological reproduction. Thus, there is some remainder to reproductive labor that is not fully captured by analyses of class, race, or imperial spoils; some notion of gender or sexual difference is also needed.

This does not mean gender should be analyzed in isolation from racial capitalism or empire. Rather, an intersectional perspective enables mapping the specificity of gender and its entanglements with migration and imperial racial capitalism. For instance, my own work delineates how the articulation of anti-immigrant and anti-abortion discourses produces reproductive injustices against immigrant women and imposes compulsory motherhood on presumptively white citizen women to control



the nation's future demographics (Leach, 2022). This entails tracing how patriarchy, racism, capitalism, nativism, and coercive state power interlock to produce myriad reproductive injustices. From an intersectional feminist perspective, theorizing social reproduction requires accounting for both (biological) reproductive justice and social (reproductive) justice.

Valdez's analysis, too, is intersectional; she brilliantly maps the interplay between social reproduction, racial capitalism, migration, and state power that underpin imperial popular sovereignty. But *Democracy and Empire's* decentering of gender within its conception of social reproduction risks occluding opportunities to push this analysis even further. For instance, Valdez notes how family separation burdens migrant men's wives with a disproportionate share of reproductive and wage labor (p. 115). But an explicitly feminist analysis of social reproduction would also reveal how migrant men's availability for exploitative wage labor depends on the exploited reproductive labor of their mothers. Rather than categorizing migrant men's labor as part of social reproduction, the argument could be re-framed as an analysis of how migrant men's exploited wage labor is extracted to sustain white families' social reproduction at the expense of preventing them from contributing equally to reproducing their own families and communities.

This slight shift in framing carries advantages beyond foregrounding migrants' mothers' labor. Because it does not collapse the production/reproduction distinction, it avoids flattening class differences among women and seizes a missed opportunity to articulate the basis for transnational cross-racial solidarity among working-class women. It highlights how distributions of income and care labor are mediated through gender as well as race, class, and immigration status, thus, pointing to the commonalities between Mexican women who perform care labor (in Mexico or the United States) and working-class U.S. women who perform similar work. By emphasizing the gendered division of labor as a site of oppression and clarifying that the benefits of exploiting migrants' social reproductive labor accrue primarily to middle- and upper-class white families (who can afford nannies and maids), the narrower conception of social reproduction leaves open the potential for solidarity between racialized migrant laborers and diverse working-class citizens.

This reframing takes up Valdez's invitation to imagine transnational democratic solidarities against imperial racial capitalism. *Democracy and Empire* argues that, given the underlying histories and material conditions, a truly democratic version of popular sovereignty cannot focus solely on domestic injustices or re-distribution within wealthy countries, because that would leave the accumulated spoils of imperial racial capitalism intact. Rather, genuinely democratic forms of self-governance must be transnational; they must challenge the global order by building cross-border relationships of solidarity between anti-imperial democratic movements.

Gendering social reproduction would help elaborate Valdez's anti-imperial popular sovereignty by highlighting transnational feminist interventions that transform social reproduction into a site for anti-capitalist struggle and worldbuilding. For instance, Federici and George Caffentzis (2014, pp. i95–i96) highlight grassroots efforts by Latin American women who opposed austerity and right-authoritarianism by creating 'communal forms of reproduction,' including the anti-Pinochet *comedores populares* (popular kitchens). Such projects provide examples of anti-capitalist feminist commons, or



‘autonomous spaces from which to reclaim control over the conditions of our reproduction’ that also function ‘as bases from which to counter the processes of enclosure and increasingly disentangle our lives from the market and the state’ (p. i101).

Through commoning, the traditionally feminized labor of social reproduction is transformed into a political project of building autonomous movements and alternative lifeworlds. This bottom-up feminist internationalism is already incubating in the global south. Latin American feminists like Verónica Gago (2020) and the *Encuentro Feminista Autónomo* (2022) urge us to join them in theorizing and enacting projects that redirect women’s unpaid labor away from reproducing capitalism and toward refiguration.

Brittany Leach

Solidarity without sovereignty?

Provocatively bookended by the January 6th (2021) assault on the Capitol and Indigenous thought, Inés Valdez’s *Democracy and Empire* seeks to transform how to conceive of the people to which we belong. To accomplish this, the book not only brings together important literatures on racial capitalism and eco-socialism in a way that enriches both but combines them with important historical archives of mobility that enable a truly transnational rewriting of Anglo-American history. All of this is in the service of understanding contemporary political problems and finding new emancipatory avenues for addressing them. It is a powerful work and a major achievement.

It is impossible to summarize such a rich book, so instead I want to highlight some of its chief virtues before raising some questions. The first virtue I want to discuss is how the book enables us to imagine global politics as a totality, though this is not a term Valdez uses. We could say that the book addresses racism, capitalism, colonialism, climate change, *and* immigration, which makes it sound like it treats these as different topics. But Valdez shows how these are all really the same topic, namely the structure of global politics. On her account, capitalism necessarily relies on imperialism, which is legitimated by a racially hierarchical popular sovereignty that casts global domination as an expression of freedom; both mobility and environmental alienation facilitate the accumulation that is the aim of this system. As Valdez puts it, ‘rather than presuming bounded realms of domination—such as “colonialism” and “migration”—and studying them separately, *Democracy and Empire* focuses on how boundaries between realms are produced in the entangled operation of political demands, imperial mobilities, and differential modes of racial oppression and resistance’ (p. 16).

Most impressively, the book conveys the dynamic nature of this structure, which is not imposed once and for all. Maintaining it is a process, continually evolving in response to changing circumstances—in Valdez’s words, ‘a colonialism that has settled on Indigenous land but is never static’ (p. 132). With respect to migration, Valdez describes this as ‘distinct regimes of domination guaranteeing a continuous system of labor control’ (p. 24). But in many respects this phrase aptly describes the book’s project as a whole, particularly if we understand labor control to include



the inputs that labor relies on reproduce itself—control over the family, the environment, and so on.

Adopting this lens, then, recasts what demands for justice and emancipation can be; what must be demanded is not inclusion into this structure but a reconstruction of the structure itself. As Valdez puts it, ‘such a framework, by recognizing the active role of popular sovereignty in channeling imperial logics, recasts racial emancipation as needing a thorough reconfiguration of political formations rather than inclusion into a given polity’ (p. 4). *Democracy and Empire* judges that the place to begin this reconfiguration is at the point where popular sovereignty is employed to legitimate this structure for non-elite members of the white polity. I have questions about this, but first I want to note what makes this move productive.

When Valdez writes, ‘instead of decrying the invasion of political realms by economic logics, it reconstructs how, historically, white *political* emancipation was intimately entangled with the management and distribution of economic wealth through the political rule of nonwhite laboring masses’ (p. 5, emphasis original), she is performing a hugely important inversion of thinkers like Chantal Mouffe and Wendy Brown who see contemporary right-wing populism as a misguided expression of frustration with the constrained political realm. On their view, when populism is set against neoliberalism, reactionary whites are readily interpreted as responding to a real problem in a misguided way—a move that can too easily slip from explanation to exculpation, seeing these groups as potential recruits to the left who have been duped by a false view. In decrying the purported domination of politics by economics, the distinction between politics and economics is reified. By contrast, Valdez contests this very distinction. She follows political Marxism in seeing the distinction between economics and politics as itself a piece of ideology that obscures reality.

By insisting that we approach the entirety of the structure of domination, *Democracy and Empire* suggests that contemporary reactionary movements are not misguided or duped but rather know exactly what they are doing: trying to preserve a polity that is shaped in a deep way by an appeal to racial hierarchy. For example, it is not an unfortunate coincidence that immigrants are so often scapegoated by populist movements. As Valdez puts it, ‘contemporary migration and its regulation [are] a core component of neo-imperial arrangements that racially partition labor conditions and access to well-being, and cannot be addressed as merely exogenous flows that provoke a “backlash”’ (p. 97). The attack on racialized and contingent laborers by whites is a constitutive part of the structure of world politics.

The book valuably demonstrates something similar with respect to environmental degradation, challenging mainstream environmentalism and ecosocialists alike by extending the frameworks of racial capitalism and settler colonialism and showing how alienation from nature is ‘mediated by techno-racism’ (p. 137). No deep and lasting solution to climate change can avoid directly confronting colonialism and being in solidarity with Indigenous peoples, since ‘the rift in the relationship between natives and land, through their forced conscription into the production of raw materials for the benefit of colonial powers, is central to the “irreparable rift” in the natural and social metabolism that Marx associates with the separation of nutrients from the soil and their transport “far beyond the bounds of a single country”’ (p. 150).



Valdez does not shy away from how widely this implicates U.S. citizens, particularly those who are white, in an unjust status quo. As she puts it, this racist structure ‘tainted popular sovereignty by turning white citizen-workers into beneficiaries of the imperial regime’ (p. 33). Alongside this critique of popular sovereignty, *Democracy and Empire* traces a critique of consumerism as whiteness that runs from W. E. B. Du Bois to Martin Luther King, Jr. This moves the book beyond a general critique of consumerism to a more direct critique of the ‘white family.’ Valdez writes, ‘truly emancipatory activism needs to highlight how [non-white] families are conscripted to provide social reproduction for white groups and capitalist accumulation and are thus public spaces of intervention’ (p. 129). Although *Democracy and Empire* does not go in this direction, the thrust of its analysis is further validated by the way that the innocent “white family” and the related construct of “parents” rights’ are mobilized to attack discussions of structural racism in educational contexts and to attack trans rights with the specters of trans proximity in bathrooms and sports.

Democracy and Empire, thus, offers a powerful analytic lens for understanding the global order today, one that improves our understanding of a wide range of phenomena from structural issues like climate to the most intimate parts of personal identity. In the rest of my contribution, I want to raise some questions about how to put this analysis to work in politics.

First, it might be surprising that the book chooses popular sovereignty as the central place to contest domination. In order to be persuasive, claims to popular sovereignty generally need to be, well, *popular*. And given how widespread entanglement with the status quo is on Valdez’s account, one might think it reasonable to pursue a different strategy for promoting justice, emancipation, and social change: not one that seeks to appeal to or claim to represent a majority but one that self-consciously speaks from the margins or for a different group, whether a revolutionary cadre strategy or some other form of direct action and revolt. I think the book has a clear and plausible answer here—the people that it invokes or imagines represent a global or transnational majority against a privileged white minority—but I do want to note that there are other paths available.

As it stands, popular sovereignty plays many roles in the book’s narrative that need to be disentangled. I see at least three different ways that popular sovereignty is discussed in *Democracy and Empire*: first, as a descriptive account of how people understand themselves and the people to which they belong and to whom they perhaps owe loyalty; second, as an explanatory account of actual practices of rule, which may differ from or even be obscured by the forms of identification that sustain those practices; third, as a normative account of how people could or should imagine themselves, one that may not have much popular uptake (yet?) but which could better or perhaps even genuinely legitimate social structures as a form of popular rule.

Those are importantly different elements of the concept, and the book does not always distinguishes them as clearly as it could. That may have significant implications for what it means to say that popular sovereignty has been ‘tainted’ and how it might be reconstructed. In particular, those elements need to be distinguished so that we can ask: what is the relationship between claims to popular sovereignty (and relatedly, to democracy) and the reality of class domination? The core of the history



Valdez theorizes in the service of understanding the present stretches over roughly a century, ending with King's anti-imperial pacifism in the late 1960s.

Given the book's own analysis of capitalism, does it make sense to say that the people of the United States and the United Kingdom genuinely enjoyed popular sovereignty during this period? Or would it be more apt to say that these were class societies run by a ruling class in which the working class was systematically denied any actual share in sovereignty and rule, even as their compliance was intermittently won through a combination of carrots and sticks? After all, capital was not shy about violently repressing workers of any color during this period; think of those who were murdered in the service of breaking the Homestead Steel Strike or the Pullman Strike, the scores killed in the Mine Wars of West Virginia, the thousands incarcerated by the Palmer Raids, and so on. None of this is to contest the book's crucial and urgent analysis of the role of racial hierarchy in incorporating white workers into the polity but simply to ask in what sense we are meant to take that incorporation.

I worry the book sometimes conflates the white working class with the white professional or middle class in its account of benefit and inclusion in popular sovereignty. The book argues, 'while external self-determination obtains (as western polities refuse to be ruled by outsiders) and internally popular sovereignty prevails (given the collective claims for inclusion and self-rule entailed in the working class demands described earlier), the rule of this collective also exceeds these boundaries' (p. 39). But this way of putting it potentially suggests that the U.S. working class really was included in self-rule during this period, which I think would surprise Eugene V. Debs or Joe Hill. In other words, we can say that the white working class was rhetorically included in the people without necessarily affording them a real share in sovereignty. Again, none of this is to negate the important role that white working class demands played, for example, in Chinese exclusion. And the book acknowledges that 'white workers were controlled, but differently' (p. 100). But I think distinguishing the different senses of popular sovereignty would help clarify how white workers subjected to systems of labor control could still be afforded an imaginative identification with state power.

Strikingly, the book's conclusion asks us to imagine 'the constitution of a people' that includes 'Indigenous, settler, slave, forced refugee, diaspora settler, migrant settler, and other statuses' (p. 196). Indeed, the book extends popular sovereignty beyond people, arguing that 'an *ecological* popular sovereignty, corrects the narrowness of popular sovereignty by recognizing the essential dependence of communities on nature, requiring relations of reciprocity toward nature, and caring for it by giving, sustaining, and regenerating it' (p. 199). Why is it important that this produces an anti-imperial and ecological popular sovereignty based in a people that includes settler and native together? Why is it not enough to have an anti-imperial and ecological *politics*? What work is the popular and the sovereign doing that makes them worth hanging on to? Or might Valdez's emancipatory aspirations be more readily realized by moving away from logics of sovereignty and considering what David Myer Temin identifies as 'the many ways that Indigenous societies' anti-colonial practices seek to disentangle the meaning of self-determination from state sovereignty—both from the institutions of the state and the conceptual logics of sovereignty' (Temin, 2023, p. 6)?



This question is connected to how the book imagines the possibilities of solidarity. Valdez writes, ‘no project of popular sovereignty can proceed soundly without the establishment of transnational solidarity ties and a global anti-oligarchic orientation’ (p. 12). The book is accordingly and rightly skeptical about many purportedly populist movements resisting the global economy and deftly shows how they are simply other ways of attempting to preserve the benefits of racial hierarchy. But I worry that in making its forceful and compelling argument about how white workers were incorporated into imperial polities, the book sometimes draws such a stark contrast that possibilities for solidarity are overlooked. For example, the book says, ‘Du Bois reveals that what ecosocialists call the “general law of environmental degradation” of capitalism is not general at all, but racialized’ (p. 159). I wonder if seeing these forms of degradation and exploitation as both racialized and generalized might not better facilitate solidarity. Consider Paul Apostolidis’s account of socially bivalent precarity, which argues that racialized and minoritized groups experience these injustices with the greatest intensity but that recognizing how other groups suffer from attenuated forms of the same ills can be the basis of solidarity (Apostolidis, 2022). Recognizing that very few of us can escape the harms of environmental degradation is entirely compatible with the book’s analysis, but I think this could be brought out more clearly in its account of solidarity.

The book poses anti-imperial opposition to the U.S. war on Vietnam as an alternative model of resistance, but what makes this a source of hope for us today? Valdez quotes James Boggs praising ‘the revolutionary process by which great masses of technologically undeveloped peoples are transforming themselves into the politically most advanced human beings the world has ever known’ (p. 187). I think it is fair to say that that did not come to pass as he hoped. I agree entirely about the continuing relevance and urgency of an anti-imperial politics today, but the ongoing imperialist actions that make this need clear also show that existing anti-imperial opposition has not been effective. For example, George W. Bush’s invasion of Iraq provoked an enormous global protest movement to stop it, but the movement failed. What can we learn not just from the possibilities earlier anti-imperial thinkers glimpsed but from the failure to realize them? Why should we think we are better positioned now?

That there is so much more I could say about this wonderful book and more questions I could raise—about its account of social reproduction, its descriptions of pre-capitalist societies, its view of the political effectivity of confronting the truth—is a testimony to what a great achievement it is.

Ben McKean

Imperial, by nature

Stuart Hall once wrote a powerful essay about the complex articulations and relations that make up the lineages and legacies of empire in contemporary politics. Asking ‘when was the post-colonial,’ Hall rejected the idea that any singular understanding of post-colonial political thinking in general would, or should, be viable



as critique. He did so also to argue that the category or idea of the post-colonial itself could have no fixed essence. Its structures and ideological articulations were a shape shifting parabola, which required constant interpretation and re-imagination (Hall, 2021 [1996]). This in part is what made it such a powerful tool for resisting the nostrums of perpetually naturalized presents governed by their own logics of ‘no alternative,’ and for re-orienting the study of the past as something with a complex but determinate connection to the present. Forms of what is now routinely called ‘structural injustice’ in academic scholarship were outlined as veritable lineages of the present, such that one could not separate out the imperial and colonial grounds from the politics of the contemporary. At the Centre for Cultural Studies Hall drove forward, with colleagues and comrades from Birmingham, a baseline that was used to cast light on many of the ways in which imperial and racist politics was articulated through the institutional sites of the modern British state, in forms of policing, through the media, or with reference to construction of forms of hegemony on one side, and moral panics and forms of state crisis and ‘authoritarian populism’ on the other. His concept of articulation was informed by Gramsci’s writings on modern politics and hegemony, as so much of the most interesting British left-wing writing on Thatcher and Thatcherism had been. It is in this sense that the articulations of modern democracy, as something akin to a dominant ideology, tie capitalism and nature together in processes of re-articulation and reproduction of imperial forms of politics.

Something like this complex sense of articulation lies behind Inés Valdez’s account of the modern relationship between democracy and empire, in a provocative and punchy narrative. Following Saidiya Hartman, Valdez sees the resonances of empire and racialized politics in modern democracy through the present, as a mixture of both the ‘continuity’ of affect that lingers long after formal processes of emancipation, independence, and reconstruction have taken place. And in turn, such affect receives political effect in structural forms of reproduction through institutional logics that adapt to the plasticity of racialized forms of conduct (p. 46). If nature and capitalism, within this broad structure, are connected by a metabolism that has nonetheless been kept separate by arguments that disconnect the true underlying drivers of both, and which through their separation serve to conceal structures that can otherwise prove that what is taken to be natural is in fact humanly constructed and artificial. What has therefore in Marxist accounts of modern ecological politics and counter-imperial histories been seen as a metabolic rift, a disconnect between nature or ecology, and politics and energy, becomes re-politicized. When this is done, something like a natural history of democracy and capitalism emerges as part of the real fabric of any meaningful explanation of structural injustice and contemporary racism.

This is similar in kind, it seems to me, to how writers such as Jason Moore have criticized John Bellamy Foster for seeing two separate entities (capitalist structures, which cause ecological effects), instead of a more holistic epistemology, with complex articulations binding things together (Moore, 2016). Valdez takes us back to an old idea that the reproduction of democracy is a cause and consequence of the logic of capitalist reproduction, which is grounded in turn on an articulation of the relationship between politics and nature that is fundamentally imperial. Building on an



established body of work in modern political theory and intellectual history (particularly of international law) that sees liberalism as the major modern manifestation of politics in (very broadly speaking) the global north, the argument of this book is that its democratic foundations are both constituted by, and constitutive of, what earlier twentieth-century writers called ‘imperial democracy.’ When Leonard Hobhouse wrote of such a construction, he wanted to signal how far imperialism deformed the presumptions of democracy as equality between citizens in economically prosperous countries (Hobhouse, 1904, pp. 180, 47). As he did so, of course, he retained a commitment to the then conventional idea of civilizational hierarchies, wherein Britain, Europe, and Euro-America, along with their empires and settler colonies, were presumed to be the apex of global politics and progress. The idea of imperial democracy now, for most contemporary political theorists, signals a critique of both category and concept, and a recognition of the inclusive and exclusionary solidarities that it represents. But *Democracy and Empire* doubles down on this narrative, which makes it both very contemporary and keen to take us back (theoretically at least) to the lessons of certain avant garde critics of the early twentieth century.

Perhaps most obviously, though he has only a minimal presence in the book, it was Lenin who wrote about capitalism and democracy being the best possible shells for each other, promising growth through competition between equals, while permitting financialized monopoly capitalism, imperial exclusions, and stymieing self-determination by entrusting democratic political institutions to a self-serving elite: democratic despotism writ large. But it is Du Bois’s version of that conundrum, rather than Lenin’s, which matters most here. Lenin’s commitment to certain policies antithetical to the demands of capitalist reproduction nonetheless worked to entrench forms of competitive economic emulation, within one country at least, socializing the land while electrifying the new order, as a way of playing economic catch-up. Soviets, plus electrification, are the model for a new order. Within this compound, nature and its bounty was precisely that, something out there, and a resource to be used for the needs of underpinning and saving the revolution, whether from reaction internally and warlike hostility overseas, or through the forced collectivization of the land as a consequence both of a commitment to national self-determination for the former satellite states of the old empire (the agency of an ‘affirmative action’ vanguard, as one historian wryly terms it), as well as a strategic choice about survival in the face of counter-revolution and war (Hobhouse, 1904).

One of the most famous illustrations of what others have called carbon democracy, or even more pointedly, carbon technocracy, was the full-scale application of a political economy of emulation underpinning the transformation of the steel producing city of Magnitogorsk (see the powerful revisionist account by Kotkin (2000)); upscaled plans for the place were newly modeled upon the examples of the largest U.S. steel producing cities like Pittsburgh and Gary, building in turn on the classic thought that energy regimes could and would drive political structures. If it worked for democratic politics, as scholars have long suggested, then it could also work for actually existing socialist politics too (Mitchell, 2011; Seow, 2022).

Yet while imperialism underpinned modern democracy through forms of extraction and profiteering by seeing both peoples and places as nature to be used, Lenin’s anti-imperialism remained abstract, to reprise a criticism that *Democracy*



and Empire uses frequently. Rather than being empirically grounded in nature, the Leninist example separated capitalist reproducibility from nature in general, just as international theorists that talk about imperial liberalism without drilling down into the structures of articulation that are local. This means that the metabolism spoken about by Marx that would connect politics, economics, and nature, has been subject to a ‘rift’—in particular, a ‘political rift’ whose logic is found in forms of what Valdez calls ‘colonial alienation,’ where the ‘political redirection of raw materials and racialized labor away from local needs and desires,’ moves instead toward forms of accumulation that alienate local populations from nature that might otherwise be restorative (p. 157).

That focus on slowness and the possibility of ecological reparation and restitution, is now of course a key driver of much environmental activism shaped by a focus on kinship relations and hybrid forms of life, and on the importance of Indigenous and first-nation status in various parts of the world. Yet it has an unexpected source in this book. For it is Du Bois, who turns out to be a prophet of slowing down. Focusing on livestock and soil, he sees the increasing speed of a capitalist worldmaking project doing exactly what Marx said it did, making worlds in its own image. But it does so precisely through those articulations that are governed by the constitution and construction of global color lines.

When it comes to thinking about labor mobility, popular sovereignty is the preeminent framing justification of modern imperial democracy within which such mobility or immobility gets fixed. For Valdez it is the ‘dynamic articulation between racism and capitalism, whose existence depends upon imperialism and whose shape is partly determined by and underpins popular sovereignty.’ Du Bois’s work is clearly the major foil for this (pp. 61, 144f, 156ff) A ‘material’ or what one might also term contextualist critique of these presumptions, connects the realities of expropriation and extraction with a particular view of ‘nature’ as something to be used and abused as outlined by those who claim the power to do so. Du Bois railed against the myriad ways in which racial classification and racist politics structured global labor and supply chains as much as they embodied color lines that crisscrossed worlds.

Valdez works similarly, discussing racialized labor politics among distinct communities of Mexicanos, Mexican Americans, and Latino migrants, to buttress the wider puzzle of articulation when seen through the constitution of Brown bodies, and particularly ‘The Brown Family,’ by structures and epistemologies of racialized violence. Indigenous, Black, and Latinx feminist scholarship and politics lies behind the critique; and as the hybridity of labor and the labor relation shows, and as radical feminist writing has long suggested, straightforward lines of articulation tend to miss the variegated forms of exclusion and oppression that come from naturalizing an approach to work and wages, or land and labor (in an older idiom) when thinking about capitalist reproduction (Battistoni, 2017).

Other recent writing on the American left has tried to repurpose the category of the exhausted rather than the proletariat or particular ‘class,’ to signal the possibilities of a strategic alignment of the globally alienated under its banner; all those who work more, for less, for longer, than ever before. In what Ajay Chaudhary terms this ‘extractive circuit’ of global capitalism, left-wing realism about ‘climate’ has faltered when set against a more ruthless right-wing climate realism of the state-market



couplet, which it understands as an ecological fortress. Moreover, where it is clear that ‘we’ are really not all in it together, the turn to hybrid forms of labor makes a lot of sense in helping to think about sites of intersection and articulation. Stretching concepts like labor, like through the category of the ‘exhausted,’ serves to align the impetus and some of the lingua franca of Marxist structural critique with a recognition of the need for climate activism on the left, at least, to connect with radical feminist and anti-colonial, anti-racist, forms of politics. It is the sense of perpetual presentism through the ‘long now’ of crisis without action, or an increasingly uninhabitable world, that makes the ecological question the political limit case of any global future (Chaudhary, 2024, pp. 49ff, 59; on ‘stretching’ concepts, pp. 40, 189; on forms of climate ‘realism,’ pp. 30, 33, 37ff, 96ff; on the ‘long now’ and limit cases, pp. 260f, 3, 38ff). What might happen, though, if and when the scale vaults upward to the level of imperial democracy seen as the destroyer of a ‘natural’ economy, that is to say, moving from the particular to the general?

Perhaps because it is Rosa Luxemburg, rather than Lenin, who provides the foil for thinking about capitalist reproduction in an imperialist international economy, her attention to soil, resources, ecosystems, and how capitalist accumulation not only requires imperialism and extraction as technology advances and consumption at home remains insufficient, capitalist accumulation and reproduction breaks the ‘social bonds of the indigenous inhabitants.’ Luxemburg’s analysis becomes a foil for a sort of proto-Anthropocenic critique of the separation of political economy from nature (p. 141). Du Bois’s criticism of such capitalist ‘techno-racism’ and imperialism took on the presumptions of technology as a signal or marker of development, and concomitantly, that speed and progress (measured by technology) was a viable or desirable measure of the ‘progress of humanity’ (p. 144). As Gloria Wekker has noted, the interconnection between technology and war in an era of imperialism both prioritized and presumed a sense of white innocence, as well as white ignorance; technological advance was deemed always necessary to be prepared for the challenge of the unknown (the ‘barbarian,’ the ‘savage,’ the frontier, the threat of finite resources, and so on) as well as a ‘neutral’ tool to be used to maintain safety and security (Wekker, 2017).

The racialized articulations of techno-warfare that were part of this period thereby permitted numerous horrors and atrocities, whose legacies also still resonate in the present of course. Du Bois clearly registered this, and therefore chose to try and re-value forms of labor (often manual) that were subsumed by the drive toward techno-modernity, and therefore supported versions of the kind of slow environmentalism and local knowledge more in line with what is usually referred to as indigenous practices and traditions, or ways of knowing, as another counterpoint to modern capitalist imperialism (p. 147ff).

Valdez, like Chaudhury, repurposes this move as a way of thinking about economic relations not so homogenized by the metabolic rift, but re-articulated through a recognition of variously intersecting political rifts, configured most straightforwardly through labor. Such thinking has clear implications for a world ‘after nature’ amid the Anthropocene (notwithstanding recent decisions about its geological applicability). If a world ‘after Nature’ is one in which planetary scales and earth systems are acknowledged as the crucial arbiters of *habitability*, they decenter any



straightforward sense of global *development* on planet Earth being somehow closed off from those wider currents, which are in many ways beyond human control and knowledge. From this point, some wildly divergent positions for re-constituting and re-articulating contemporary politics emerge: from moves toward kin, rather than ‘population,’ in the hybridizing work of Strathern (2014) and Haraway (2016), to the entangled humanisms of post-structuralist political theorists like William Connolly (2017).

For the more historically minded, a search for a new humanist vocabulary of anthropology, enlightenment, and reason, amid the climate parallax is crucial. There, world and planet combine in potentially discordant ways that structure a politics along the lines of something like combined and uneven development, with a complex sense of the interplay of deep time, democratic time, and temporalities of the so-called Great Acceleration (Chakrabarty, 2019, esp. pp.17–19, 2023; Kelly, 2019; Zalasiewicz et al., 2021). Such environmental histories of political thought serve to show the ecological limits (of affluence and abundance) that underpin mainstream notions of Anglo-American freedom (Charbonnier, 2021). They also signal their limits not only in the face of climate crises but also their limitations in general, if they fail to engage with the ongoing force of the post-colonial and decolonial challenge. If there is hope to be found amid the ruins, then political theory will have to work as hard as any other field of study in politics to retain its relevance. But with works like *Democracy and Empire*, those among the guild of political theorists can have some credible belief that there are ways of putting the pieces back together again that can really speak to the needs of democracy in this present, by continuing to do serious historical and normative work on its imperial pasts.

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