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Emancipations: A Journal of Critical Social Analysis

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Introduction

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It is not an exaggeration to claim that the Left has painfully struggled to find an appropriate and fruitful way of reacting to the worrisome success of right-wing populist, far right and otherwise authoritarian political actors across the world, including (or especially) in so-called 'Western' liberal democracies. This has also resulted into an inability to offer truly alternative political visions, which can offer compelling narratives of current injustices and show how rampant transnational inequalities can be overcome in an egalitarian fashion. One seductive yet deeply problematic route that both left leaning political parties and intellectuals have so far taken is a nostalgic return to the eerie dream of an isolationist social democracy closed inside its own borders (and inevitably racially homogenous). Consider, for instance, how Mette Frederiksen, the leader of Socialdemokratiet, who led the left-wing bloc winning the 2019 general elections in Denmark, run on a xenophobic, anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant political platform. Or, the left-wing case for Brexit vocally made by some intellectuals, which basically suggested that social democracy in the UK was possible only by leaving the European Union (see, e.g., Tuck 2020).

Inés Valdez's path-breaking *Democracy and Empire: Labor, Nature, and the Reproduction of Capitalism* offers a powerful diagnosis of why the Left falls so often prey to the temptation of envisioning restrictive immigration policies (and halting multicultural accommodation) to restore popular sovereignty. This is because of the complex entanglement of imperialism, democracy, and racial capitalism, which those left-wing contemporary political projects either ignore or deliberately refuel. Chapter 1 argues that popular sovereignty conserves a deep attachment to wealth that is secured by collectively dominating 'others'. It builds on W.E.B Du Bois' concept of 'democratic despotism' to theorise the key notion of 'self-and-other-determination', which captures how Western democracies' self-determination involves a

claim to both govern themselves and dominate others. In Valdez's words, 'popular sovereignty [becomes] a collective right that is not exhausted by self-government but dependent on rule over avowedly inferior people, whose self-determination is denied and who are subject to expropriative workings conditions within and outside the polity' (Valdez 2023, 39). By building on the political thought of Franz Fanon and Saidiya Hartman, Valdez shows the significance of racist affective attachments and of their persistence under new circumstances. Chapter 2 continues the investigation of 'imperial popular sovereignty' by recovering how popular discourses embraced by white labor in the US and the British settler colonies endorsed an imperial logic to frame nonwhite workers as an economic threat and take their share of the spoils of imperial conquest and domination. As Valdez observes, this logic still reverberates in contemporary left-wing politics, which has, at least in some of its forms, internalized 'the racialized logics that characterize capitalism' (Valdez 2023, 89), and yet it is overlooked by prominent analyses of neoliberalism and immigration put forward by critical theorists like Wendy Brown. Chapter 3 further contributes to the analysis of the interplay between racialization and capitalism by drawing on feminist social reproduction theory to theorise processes of capitalist racialisation that assure social reproduction in the US. Valdez argues that the heterosexual patriarchal white family is highly reliant on nurturing and care labor of brown workers who are treated as disposable. Such a nurturing and care labor to sustain white households in turn 'disorders brown families depleting their emotional spaces and regenerative abilities. Young members are turned into adult ones due to family separation, and members of brown families are in a state of constant anxiety of losing their loved ones to detention and deportation' (Valdez 2023, 95). Chapter 4 shows that 'capitalism, in its quest for accumulation, appropriates labor alongside nature in colonial or

postcolonial regions, a process facilitated by the technology-mediated devaluation of these two concepts' (Valdez 2020, 133). By merging Marx and Luxemburg's analyses of capitalism and land dispossession with Du Bois's writings on development and the racialised valuation of technology, this chapter contends that imperial popular sovereignty also involves an ecological destruction, which unfolds through racialised hierarchies and 'radically disrupts ecological and sociopolitical formations abroad' (Valdez 2020, 134).

Valdez's book does not only offer a seminal and insightful analysis of how racialized capitalism, imperialism, and popular sovereignty have been intertwined, but also it offers visions of alternative paths left-wing politics should take. In Chapter 5, Valdez develops an anti-imperial version of popular sovereignty, which is built upon relationships of transnational solidarity. It does so by building on Martin Luther King's speech on Vietnam and Franz Fanon's writings on national consciousness and transnationalism. The upshot of this dialogue between King and Fanon is an anti-imperial recasting of popular sovereignty that is anti-oligarchic and connects with democratic movements over the world. This is an anti-imperial account of popular sovereignty that shows that democratic politics is truly democratic only if it is transnational. Chapter 6 concludes by turning to how Marxist, Black, and Indigenous thought have conceptualised relations of care and reciprocity as fundamental to land and conceived of land as 'core to cultural, social, and political relations' (Valdez 2020, 26). This opens up the possibility of 'collective claims that reintegrate nature and communal and self-determining projects of natives, while eschewing circuits of capitalist exploitation and accumulation that depend on settlement, forced and exploited labor, and accumulation abroad' (Valdez 2020, 203).

All the contributors to this symposium on Valdez's *Democracy and Empire* concur in praising the book as an impressive achievement, which illuminates our understanding of popular sovereignty and is of great relevance to our present political predicament. However, they press Valdez's argument at some of its key junctures, by (i) casting light on the pervasiveness of environmentalism across the left and right political spectrum, (ii) investigating further the relationship between race and capitalism, and (iii) probing the interplay between capitalism and democracy.

Kieran Dunn's contribution zooms in on Valdez's ecological reading of Du Bois's writings on empire and development. Du Bois illustrates that the nature/technology divide has some profound racial connotations in that it is those societies that are deemed to be technologically advanced that can aptly dominate and rule over nonwhite people and their land. In this way, nature itself is underrated and both white and nonwhite subjects are alienated from it. Dunn asks whether, as important as it might be, this reading of the relationship between nature and imperialism fully captures the complex ways in which the environment figures in contemporary projects of imperial capitalism. He poignantly points out that even capitalist corporations make use of environmentalist concerns in order to maximise their profits in times of increased environmental sensibility.¹ Dunn asks what this new political language means for the dependence of capitalism on the destruction of nature. Moreover, he also points out how, in some contexts, self-and-other determination has been able to incorporate nature and certain nonhuman animals into itself so as to keep dominating racialized others.

¹ Similarly, one might point to the emergent discourse in environmental politics of 'eco-bordering', i.e., a discourse that 'casts immigration (of which migration from the Global South is made hyper-visible) as a threat to the local or national environment and consequently presents borders as forms of environmental protection' (Turner and Bailey 2022, 112), as complicating the relationship between nature and racism depicted by Du Bois.

In her paper, Emily Katzenstein pauses on Valdez's account of racial capitalism and, specifically, on her characterization of the interplay between race and capitalist accumulation and her neglect of the contingency of whiteness. In particular, according to Katzenstein, it is not clear whether Valdez believes that racialization advances or is functional to capitalism. According to Katzenstein, there are moments in which racialization clashes with the logics of capitalist accumulation and, therefore, we cannot conclude that the former is necessarily functional to the latter. Moreover, Katzenstein observes that, although Valdez acknowledges the historical contingency of racial categorisations, she takes whiteness too much as a static and fixed formation. Instead, Katzenstein points out that we can learn a lot about how changes in the forms of racialization result from new economic conflicts by looking at the history of groups who were successful in claiming whiteness (e.g., famously Irish and Italian immigrants in the US; see Ignatiev 1995; Gugliermo and Salerno 2012) and those who, instead, fail to do so.

In her contribution, Regina Kreide focuses on Valdez's engagement with democracy and capitalism. First, she asks about the roots of the conception of democracy, which Valdez endorses as antithetical to the democratic project shaped by and embedded in racism and imperialism. If democracy is still meant to have some critical and inspirational bent – something that Valdez seems to hold up to – it has to be grounded on some sources of normativity. Second, Kreide invites Valdez to clarify which kind of democracy is entangled with the imperial project. Democracy comes in very different shapes not only as an actual form of government, but as a normative political project (e.g., from liberal constitutional democracy to participatory and fugitive democracy). When Valdez argues that popular sovereignty is interwoven with relations of racial exploitation and imperial domination, is she referring to democracy writ large, or with some of its forms? Third, Kreide observes that, when

it comes to the interplay between democracy and capitalism, it is important to investigate which types of alternatives to capitalism are compatible with democracy. In particular, is the concept of ownerships so incompatible with democracy as one may infer from Valdez's account? Are not visions of collective ownership possible expressions of democratic values? Do they not offer a possible path from capitalism to a truly egalitarian transnational economic system?

In her reply, Valdez answers to all those important challenges, by teasing out the normative basis and dialectical potential of self-determination and popular sovereignty, clarifying the relation between capitalism and racism, and reflect on the interplay between racism and ecology.

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