1 *Popular Sovereignty and the End of Empire*

1.1 "The Fate of the Common People"

On November 17, 1935, the Indian economist Joseph Cornelius Kumarappa was invited by a group of students at the University of Allahabad to reflect on the politics of the anti-colonial movement in British India. Writing in a special issue of the campus newspaper *The Students' Outlook*, Kumarappa focused his remarks on the meaning that "the sovereignty of the people" – the basis of any "attempt by a community to govern itself" in a democratic manner – should have for countries under European colonial rule.[1] He compared the two main political models in front of colonial peoples in the mid-1930s: the liberal representative democracy of Britain and the United States, or Soviet Communism. Both systems promised to base government on the consent, will, and power of "the people": "when the people were groaning under autocracy and the burden of supporting their autocratic feudal lords they yearned for a 'Government of the people, for the people, and by the people.'"[2] Yet both, in reality, failed to deliver on such lofty republican ideals, formalizing a set of institutions that kept the actual people away from the arena of political rule: "they aim at the masses having power in their hands but in effect the few at the top hold the reins."[3] Kumarappa argued that liberal democracy and Soviet-style Communism shared an attachment to a regime of representation whose organization was inimical to direct popular rule. Whether the task of the state was market regulation or large-scale property redistribution, its internal structure delegated sovereignty to members of political parties and to a limited number of legislative bodies, circumscribing the exercise of popular power. "The fate of

[1] J. C. Kumarappa, "Communism and the Common People," in J. C. Kumarappa Private Papers – Articles by Him, vol. 1, no. 29, 174–77, at 174, Manuscripts Collection, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML), New Delhi.
[2] Ibid. [3] Ibid., 175.

the common people under a benevolent capitalism," Kumarappa wrote, "has not been much improved under Soviet Communism. In both cases, public opinion is molded by a small group who also hold the press to strict censorship. Economic activity is planned and controlled from the center."[4] If anti-colonial nationalism was to really allow "a community to govern itself," then non-European leaders needed to move beyond the capitalist-Communist binary and question the very political form – the modern state premised on political representation – on which the two models rested.

This book is an attempt to take seriously, on its own terms, the understanding of anti-colonial popular sovereignty articulated by Joseph Kumarappa in the middle weeks of November 1935. Though written for a regional campus publication with limited readership – and, as far as we know, never reprinted anywhere outside of Allahabad – Kumarappa's short article encapsulated a growing frustration during the interwar period with many of the accepted maxims of anti-colonial nationalism: the demand for national independence, for a powerful state, and for representative institutions able to secure political rights for those reduced to the status of imperial subjects. The goal of the next seven chapters is to recapture the nature of this critical political imaginary, identifying its intellectual sources and the ideas of its main proponents. By the time Kumarappa's essay was published in *The Students' Outlook* in 1935, much political debate in South Asia revolved around the issue of "self-rule," often transliterated into the Sanskritic term *swaraj*. The term *swaraj* was first deployed in a political sense by the nationalist leader Dadabhai Naoroji during a rally in Tollygunge, Calcutta on December 26, 1906. For Naoroji, *swaraj* meant the introduction into India of parliamentary government patterned on Britain or on the semi-independent settler states of Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.[5] It entailed, as Naoroji argued, the creation of "a constitutional representative system" like in "the self-governing colonies."[6] Three years later, the pamphlet *Hind Swaraj, or Indian Home Rule* (1909), authored by the young lawyer Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi during a journey between London and South

[4] Ibid.
[5] Dadabhai Naoroji, *The Late Dr. Dadabhai Naoroji on Swaraj: Presidential Address at the Calcutta Congress 1906* (Bombay, 1917), 13–14. See Dinyar Patel, *Naoroji: Pioneer of Indian Nationalism* (Cambridge, MA, 2020), 242–50.
[6] Naoroji, *The Late Dr. Dadabhai Naoroji on Swaraj*, 13–14.

Africa on the SS *Kildonan Castle*, both paid homage to Naoroji and criticized how easily *swaraj* had been collapsed into a matter of electoral reform.[7] As *swaraj* became a concept bandied about back and forth in nationalist circles over the next five decades, it raised fundamental questions about imperial and postimperial political founding. What would self-determination within – and eventually beyond – the British Empire in fact look like? What did it mean for a colonial people to become self-ruling? Kumarappa's essay in November 1935 was a response to precisely these questions. His answer – and that of a group of others, this book seeks to demonstrate – was that self-determination would remain incomplete under a state that allowed for the elected representation of colonial peoples. The more transformative, more urgent, and more *democratic* task was to find participatory mechanisms for popular rule, which might make a people into agents rather than objects of government.

Indian political thinkers who challenged the relationship between political representation and popular sovereignty in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s did so against the backdrop of enormous global transformations. Recent scholarship in intellectual history has shown how the interwar period was marked by a striking degree of political and legal experimentation, both within Europe and beyond it. The years from 1917/18 to 1945 were beset by what C. A. Bayly has described as a far-reaching, drawn-out "world crisis" stretching across continents.[8] In Jan-Werner Müller's memorable phrasing, "no liberal answers for the democratic age had emerged by the mid-1920s," and, "in the absence of any kind of stable constitutional settlement," those conscripted into European modernity had to "keep on experimenting with political forms and principles."[9] On the specific question of democracy,

[7] M. K. Gandhi, *"Hind Swaraj" and Other Writings*, ed. Anthony J. Parel (Cambridge, 1997), 13–18.

[8] C. A. Bayly, *Remaking the Modern World, 1900–2015: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Hoboken, 2018), 12–48.

[9] Jan-Werner Müller, *Contesting Democracy: Political Ideas in Twentieth-Century Europe* (New Haven, 2011), 48. On political experimentation around the question of state sovereignty in the interwar period, also see Marc Stears, *Progressives, Pluralists, and the Problems of the State: Ideologies of Reform in the United States and Britain, 1909–1926* (Oxford, 2008), 128–98; Cécile Laborde, *Pluralist Thought and the State in Britain and France, 1900–1925* (New York, 2000); Jeanne Morefield, "Urgent History: The Sovereignty Debates and Political Theory's Lost Voices," *Political Theory*, vol. 45, no. 2 (2017), 164–91;

following the cataclysm of WWI, it was no longer clear to many why the demands of newly enfranchised populations should be channeled through constitutional parliamentary states. Writing from London in 1917, the British economist John Hobson observed that WWI had demonstrated the hollowness of modern electoral democracy, particularly the vulnerability of democratic institutions and political parties to capture by oligarchic economic interests. He insisted that it was misguided to consider the liberal states of the West as democracies in any real sense of the term:

> The forms of political self-government, indeed, exist in Britain, France, America and elsewhere with varying measures of completeness. But nowhere does the will of the people play freely through these forms. In every country the will of certain powerful men or interests is pumped down from above into the party machinery that it may come up with the formal register of an electorate denied the knowledge and opportunity to create and exercise a will that is informed and free. Popular opinion and aspirations act at best as exceedingly imperfect checks on these abuses of political self-government. So evident has been the failure of all democratic forms hitherto devised that hostile critics have pronounced democracy incapable of realization.[10]

As representative democracy lost its luster after 1917, Hobson suggested there would be an intellectual backlash against many of its core principles, for "not only the spirit but the very forms of popular self-government have suffered violation."[11]

Hobson's prediction was prescient. That same year, W. E. B. Du Bois argued in an essay for the *Journal of Race Development* that neither the United States under Woodrow Wilson nor the capitalist, constitutional states of Western Europe were full democracies, since they all disenfranchised and subjugated their colonial subjects.[12] With the outbreak of socialist revolution in Germany in 1918, Rosa Luxemburg authored a defense of "anti-parliamentarism," advocating direct self-legislation through workers' councils.[13] Hobson's fellow

and Mira L. Siegelberg, *Statelessness: A Modern History* (Cambridge, MA, 2020), 49–154.

[10] J. A. Hobson, *Democracy after the War* (London, 1917), 5. [11] Ibid., 15.

[12] W. E. B. Du Bois, "Of the Culture of White Folk," *Journal of Race Development*, vol. 7, no. 4 (1917), 434–47.

[13] Rosa Luxemburg, "What Does the Spartacus League Want?" in *Selected Political Writings of Rosa Luxemburg*, ed. Dick Howard (New York, 1971), 366–76.

British socialist G. D. H. Cole held that electoral forms of working-class politics, such as that practiced by the British Labor Party and the trade union movement, had run their course by 1918, and the need of the hour was for more revolutionary alternatives.[14] When Carl Schmitt thus declared in 1923 that the liberal ideal of reasoned deliberation within elected representative legislatures, inherited from John Stuart Mill and François Guizot, was no longer tenable in the twentieth century, he was conveying a sentiment as formative for the post-WWI left as for the reactionary Caesarist dictatorships that would arise in the 1920s and 1930s.[15]

Discussions about political representation and *swaraj* in colonial India were produced by the particular conditions of South Asia in the first half of the twentieth century but were also, at the same time, deeply global phenomena. They were imbricated in a transnational backlash against liberalism and driven by larger ruptures in thinking about parliamentarism and representative democracy after 1917 and 1918. Revisiting the Indian sovereignty debates provides us with a concrete archive to evaluate modern anti-colonialism as a body of *democratic* thought. To put the point in a slightly different manner: What was the *democratic* dimension of the protest against European imperial rule? What did opposition to imperialism entail in terms of theories of popular sovereignty and government? How did anti-colonial movements respond to the denial of political rights by European empires, and what did they offer as potential correctives?[16] The challenge to representative government in thinking about *swaraj*

[14] G. D. H. Cole, *Self-Government in Industry* (London, 1918).

[15] Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. Ellen Kennedy (Cambridge, MA, 1985).

[16] Recent work on twentieth-century anti-colonial democratic thought includes: James Tully, "Civic Freedom contra Imperialism," in *Public Philosophy in a New Key*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, 2008), 225–309; Margaret Kohn and Keally D. McBride, *Political Theories of Decolonization: Postcolonialism and the Problem of Foundations* (New York, 2011); Karuna Mantena, "Popular Sovereignty and Anti-Colonialism," in *Popular Sovereignty in Historical Perspective*, eds. Richard Bourke and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge, 2016), 297–319; and Nazmul S. Sultan, "Self-Rule and the Problem of Peoplehood in Colonial India," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 114, no. 1 (2020), 81–94. For an account of anti-imperial popular sovereignty focused on the eighteenth-century Haitian Revolution, see Kevin Olson, *Imagined Sovereignties: The Power of the People and Other Myths of the Modern Age* (Cambridge, 2016), 144–66.

underscores how one argument within twentieth-century anti-colonial thought – neither the only nor the most pervasive argument, by any account, but an important one for around six decades – was about the illegitimacy of electoral representation as the primary vehicle for self-determination. If the purpose of countering empire was to make a people self-governing, to turn them from subjects to citizens – to give them, as a collective body, the right of authorship over laws – then, it followed, the concentration of lawmaking authority within a limited number of institutions and persons undermined the scope of self-government. Grounding a political alternative to imperial rule within the strictures and constraints of a liberal constitutional order was considered incompatible with a democratic interpretation of the principle of self-determination. From the perspective of this interwar tradition, genuinely anti-colonial political thinking was an experiment in reevaluating the institutional forms of popular rule.

1.2 "The Awakening of the Orient": Empire and Colonial Freedom

The possibility of collective political self-government exercised directly by colonial peoples themselves began to crystallize as an idea in European political thought during the opening decades of the twentieth century. A number of the British commentators whom Gregory Claeys has characterized as "imperial sceptics" greeted national independence movements in India, Iran, Egypt, and East Asia as evidence that European liberalism's pedagogical mission of rendering non-European peoples fit for modern self-government had finally succeeded, and might now be safely stalled.[17] L. T. Hobhouse argued in 1911 that "nothing has been more encouraging to the Liberalism of Western Europe in recent years than the signs of political awakening in the East," offering as an example Iranian constitutional opposition to the extension of British influence in the country in 1908 and 1909.[18] Until the turn of the twentieth century, the sociologist insisted that "it seemed as though it would in the end be impossible to resist the ultimate 'destiny' of the

[17] Gregory Claeys, *Imperial Sceptics: British Critics of Empire, 1850–1920* (Cambridge, 2010).

[18] L. T. Hobhouse, *Liberalism*, ed. James Meadowcroft (Cambridge: 1994), 114. On Hobhouse and empire, see Duncan Bell, *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire* (Princeton, 2016), 341–62.

white races to be masters of the rest of the world," but the rising chorus of demands for parliamentary government and independent states in the colonies – "the awakening of the Orient, from Constantinople to Pekin" – was "the greatest and most hopeful fact of our time" for those critical of imperial militarism.[19] For the Fabian socialist Sidney Webb in January 1918, the acceleration of colonial home rule signaled that the assumptions of civilizational superiority that had propelled European expansion through the nineteenth century were on the verge of collapse: "just as in the past the civilizations of Babylon, Egypt, Greece, Carthage, and the great Roman Empire have been successively destroyed, so, in the judgement of this detached observer, the civilization of all Europe is even now receiving its death blow."[20]

The most systematic and certainly the most influential analysis published in the 1910s of what Leonard Hobhouse called "the awakening of the Orient" came not from the Western European capitals of London, Paris, or Brussels, but from a tottering, tumultuous Russian Empire on the eve of WWI. Vladimir Ilyich Lenin's *The Right of Nations to Self-Determination* (1914), published as a set of essays in the St. Petersburg Bolshevik journal *Prosveshcheniye* (*Enlightenment*) between April and June 1914 (while Lenin himself was in exile in Poland), was an attempt to give a comparative account of non-European nationalist struggle, within the framework of the Marxist tradition as Lenin understood it. Lenin took there to be an important functional difference between successive waves of national revolution in Europe through the nineteenth century and national revolution in the colonies of European powers. Europe between the French Revolution of 1789 and the unification of Germany in 1871 had undergone "an epoch of bourgeois-democratic revolutions," as popular national movements sought to establish commercial, representative republics led by a national bourgeoisie – an observation Marx had made often in his late work, Engels had famously reiterated in "Socialism: Utopian and Scientific" (1880), and Lenin adopted from them both.[21] European colonies in the early twentieth century confronted

[19] Hobhouse, *Liberalism*, 114.
[20] Sidney Webb, *Labor and the New Social Order: A Report on Reconstruction* (London, 1918), 3. See Claeys, *Imperial Sceptics*, 228.
[21] V. I. Lenin, "The Right of Nations to Self-Determination," in *Lenin: Collected Works* (*CW*), vol. 20 (December 1913–August 1914), trans. Bernard Isaacs and Joe Fineberg, ed. Julius Katzer (Moscow, 1964), 393–454, at 405–6. Also see

a different situation, subject to an extractive, monopolistic global market extending outward from Western Europe and its satellite states, woven into the material networks of empire, a system Lenin analyzed at greater length in the pamphlet *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1917).[22] The demand for popular government in national terms in a colonial setting was, consequently, a demand for control over the imperialist world-system. Unlike most European national movements of the previous century, anti-imperial nationalism in the colonies challenged the expansion of European commercial power. Lenin upheld support for colonial independence movements as a pillar of Bolshevik foreign policy, stating that "the nationalism of any oppressed nation has a general democratic content that is directed *against* oppression, and it is this content that we *unconditionally* support."[23] His model was Marx's enthusiasm for Polish independence in the mid-1860s.[24]

What did Lenin's theory of anti-imperial nationalism imply for political strategy in the colonial world? For one thing, as Sanjay Seth has argued, Lenin failed to adequately distinguish between anti-imperialism seeking to counter European domination out of opposition to capitalism, and anti-imperialism seeking to counter European domination in order to build up state-led domestic capitalism.[25] The Indian Marxist Manabendra Nath Roy (M. N. Roy) thus criticized Lenin's blanket support for anti-imperialism.[26] But, going further, by 1917 Lenin was adamant, with what Rosa Luxemburg described as an

Friedrich Engels, "Socialism: Utopian and Scientific," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York, 1978), 683–717.

22 V. I. Lenin, "Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism," in *Lenin: CW*, vol. 22 (December 1915–July 1916), 185–304.

23 Lenin, "The Right of Nations," 412.

24 Ibid., 432–33; and Karl Marx, "Poland's European Mission (1867)," in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Russian Menace to Europe: A Collection of Articles, Speeches, Letters*, eds. Paul W. Blackstock and Bert F. Hoselitz (Glencoe, IL, 1952), 104–8. On Marx and Poland, see Kevin B. Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies* (Chicago, 2010), 42–78.

25 Sanjay Seth, *Marxist Theory and Nationalist Politics: The Case of Colonial India* (New Delhi, 1995), 48–51.

26 M. N. Roy, "Original Draft of the Supplementary Theses on the National and Colonial Question," in *Selected Works of M. N. Roy*, vol. I, ed. Sibnarayan Roy (New Delhi, 1987), 165–68.

"iron consistency,"[27] that the only truly revolutionary regime in the colonies, as in Russia, would need to be a militarily powerful, fiscally centralized, and coercive workers' state. In the important pamphlet *State and Revolution* (1918), Lenin elaborated a theory of state power rooted in a historical and sociological account of the inevitability of violent class conflict. The modern state and its various organs – a standing military and police force, representation through parliament, and monopoly over territory, citizenship, and population – were products of a rising bourgeoisie's efforts to consolidate its power over other classes. The origins of the European state lay in its capacity to act as a "'special coercive force' for the suppression of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie, of millions of working people by handfuls of the rich."[28] As an organized working class began to gain political power, it confronted the intransigence of a bourgeoisie resisting the dismantling of its political and economic domination. During the period of revolutionary struggle, the coercive apparatus of the modern state provided the proletariat with institutions to expropriate private capitalist production. What Lenin called "the dictatorship of the proletariat" carried out a revolution against the resurgence of capitalism using the tools of the bourgeoisie, relying on "state power, a centralized organization of force."[29] Like the democratic republics it replaced, Lenin's revolutionary state was premised on political representation. Lenin stated that he did not aim for "the abolition of representative institutions and the elective principle," but for the "conversion of representative institutions from talking shops into 'working' bodies."[30]

[27] Rosa Luxemburg, "The Russian Revolution," in *The Russian Revolution and Leninism or Marxism?* ed. Bertram D. Wolfe (Ann Arbor, 1961), 25–80, at 34–35.

[28] V. I. Lenin, "The State and Revolution: The Marxist Theory of the State and the Tasks of the Proletariat in the Revolution," in *Lenin: CW*, vol. 25 (June–September 1917), 385–497, at 402.

[29] Ibid., 409. On the longer intellectual genealogy of Lenin's ideas about dictatorship and revolution, see Dan Edelstein, "Revolution in Permanence and the Fall of Popular Sovereignty," in *The Scaffolding of Sovereignty: Global and Aesthetic Perspectives on the History of a Concept*, eds. Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, Stefanos Geroulanos, and Nicole Jerr (New York, 2017), 371–92, at 384–86. On the Marxist conception of dictatorship more generally, see Lea Ypi, "Democratic Dictatorship: Political Legitimacy in Marxist Perspective," *European Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 28, no. 2 (2020), 277–91.

[30] Lenin, "State and Revolution," 428.

In practice, this meant the concentration of sovereign lawmaking power within a vanguard workers' party legislating on behalf of the proletariat from a single state assembly. Lenin rejected ideas about the federalist devolution of legislative power to local communes outlined in the middle of the nineteenth century by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Mikhail Bakunin as unhelpful utopianism, echoing Marx's critique in 1874 of Bakunin's *Statism and Anarchy* (1873).[31] Lenin's commitment to a centralized representative state, as Tracy Strong has observed, derived from a realistic assessment of the constraints imposed by conflict on political founding.[32]

Unsurprisingly, with Lenin's rise, support for the construction of Leninist states became part of the official Bolshevik approach to anti-imperial nationalism from the mid-1910s. Joseph Stalin's "Marxism and the National Question" (1913), an essay Lenin commissioned from Stalin in Vienna, accepted the normative value of the nation as a political community, advocated a strong centralized state in opposition to empire, and decried "unlimited federalism" as a pernicious form of "separatism."[33] Over eight days between August 31 and September 7, 1920, the Bolshevik-dominated Third Communist International (Comintern) convened the "Congress of the Peoples of the East" in Baku, Azerbaijan, an ambitious gathering of nationalists from Central Asia, the Caucasus, Iran, and India. The Red Army was still fighting a brutal civil war on three fronts, but Lenin's Bolsheviks were also making rapid gains into the border regions of the erstwhile Russian Empire, including into Azerbaijan itself. Part of the goal of the Congress of the Peoples of the East was to endear the Bolsheviks to non-European nationalities and to present the newly ascendant Russian regime as an ally of Asian opposition to British, French, and American imperialism. The meeting was led by Grigory Zinoviev and Karl Radek, both prominent Bolsheviks who would fall victim to Stalin's purges in the 1930s.[34]

[31] Ibid., 434.
[32] Tracy B. Strong, *Politics without Vision: Thinking without a Banister in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago, 2012), 184–217.
[33] Joseph Stalin, "Marxism and the National Question," in *Marxism and the National Question: Selected Writings and Speeches* (New York, 1942), 7–68, at 65. See Eric D. Weitz, *A World Divided: The Global Struggle for Human Rights in the Age of Nation-States* (Princeton, 2019), 288–89.
[34] The Baku Congress has been surprisingly neglected by historians, despite Congress proceedings having been available in Russian since the 1920s and in