Introduction

On January 6, 2021, a mob stormed the US Capitol to stop the joint session of Congress from certifying the electoral votes cast for Joe Biden. The group had been encouraged by then President Trump to go to the Capitol and "fight like hell" against a "comprehensive assault on our democracy."[1] However false these claims are, they underpin a racial construction of a people, who felt their right to rule threatened by Black and brown citizens, whose grassroots organizing gave Georgia and Arizona to Biden and secured his election as the 46th president of the United States.[2] *Democracy and Empire* argues that the force of the arguments that led Trump supporters to storm the Capitol on January 6 harkens back to

[1] Brian Naylor, "Read Trump's Jan. 6 Speech, A Key Part of Impeachment Trial," *National Public Radio*, February 10, 2021.

[2] While Trump mentioned fictitious maneuvers of voter fraud in several states that day, he was particularly personal with Stacey Abrams, whom he mentioned five times, arguing that the problem with Georgia's results was "Fulton County, home of Stacey Abrams," adding later that he had to fight against "Michelle Obama, Barack Hussein Obama, against Stacey." Trump also focused his attention on Arizona, where he falsely claimed that "over 36,000 ballots were illegally cast by non-citizens" and that more votes were counted than there were actual voters. He went on to say that in Maricopa County 50,000 people registered after the deadline. These two states were won through grassroots organizing by Black and Latinx voters that was central to swing the states for Biden. This organizing had started years before, with Stacey Abrams's gubernatorial campaign in 2018, or even a decade prior, with the campaign against Sheriff Joe Arpaio's targeting of brown people and Arizona's "show me your papers" 2010 law. Ibid., Aída Chávez, "If Arizona Goes Blue, Look to Joe Arpaio – and the Latinos Who Organized against Him," *The Intercept*, November 2, 2020, Hannah Miao, "Democrats' Historic Georgia Senate Wins Were Years in the Making Thanks to Local Grassroots," *CNBC*, January 9, 2021, Anoa Changa, "Grassroots Organizers Flipped Georgia Blue. Here's How They Did It," *Truthout*, November 12, 2020.

notions of the people that emerged in the context of empire, which – through settlement, slavery, conquest, and colonialism – built the racial formations that still frame US politics. These formations delimited the people and entailed the political rule and more intense capitalist exploitation of nonwhite people-qua-workers. These workers, located both at home and abroad, produced the wealth that was politically declared to rightfully belong to white collectives.

By describing the crowd as "the most amazing sight," "the real people … that built this nation," and by setting a militaristic tone by thanking "the police and law enforcement" and praising his own record on the military and "our vets," Trump put forward a particular picture of the people and its relation to the global. This group, with its extraordinary love for "this amazing country," was contrasted with Biden, who wanted to end the "America First" policy, and with others who "tore down this nation" and its monuments. These claims issue a historically intelligible call for a white democracy, one that, relying on the military and the police, can assert its global stature against the declining legitimacy of the American empire and resist challenges by nonwhite groups at home.

Democracy and Empire reconceptualizes central notions in political theory to make sense of these claims and the real system they reference and defend: imperial popular sovereignty and self-determination. The book goes beyond existing accounts of white democracy by theorizing the material and ecological components of this form of rule and conceptualizing it as a properly transnational imperial form. This requires tracing the racial capitalist logics that marked the historical emergence of claims of popular sovereignty in western polities and their reliance on imperial forms of extraction. The book makes the case that 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. These structures still organize global accumulation, whose terms are the subject of contemporary authoritarian outbursts affecting wealthy democracies.

The book relies on the Black radical tradition, including the work of W. E. B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, Martin Luther King, Hortense Spillers, and Saidiya Hartman to trace how imperial logics were absorbed by democratic polities operating within empires, imbuing emancipatory notions and practices of popular sovereignty and self-determination. Through these thinkers, and in conversation with Indigenous and Latino political thought, I put forward a three-part theory of the joint operation of

racial capitalism, empire, and democratic politics.[3] First, *Democracy and Empire* conceptualizes *popular* sovereignty as a declaration demanding a part of a stock of wealth obtained through imperial violence that subjects others outside the collective. In other words, rather than distribute the wealth obtained collectively by a group among their members, imperial popular sovereignty demands to violently appropriate the wealth of others. Second, the book analyzes historical moments and emancipatory claims made by white groups to show that popular claims themselves were imbued with notions of white self-government that had affinities with imperial thinking. This step specifies further the racial ideologies that underpin popular claims and constitute the people *while* legitimating wealth extraction from racialized groups and regions deemed backward. In a third step, I attend to the basis of popular sovereignty in imperial polities, namely, the reciprocal interaction between a variety of regimes of racial domination, which evolved in articulation with each other to sustain privileged groups. To understand these processes, I zoom into how the racialized political claims and structures conscripted racialized labor *and* nature to facilitate the social reproduction of western societies. Political resistance and partial liberation within polities, I argue, led to negotiation, adjustment, and mutual rearticulation of regimes of racial oppression that targeted and target Africans and African Americans, Indian and Chinese indentured workers, Indigenous peoples, and Latinos in the United States.

This approach conceptualizes the mutual articulation of structures of racial oppression targeting differently racialized groups while attending to the heterogeneity of the institutions that enforce such oppression and their evolution in response to crises and resistance. This mutual articulation pushes against the taxonomic divisions between global and domestic realms, which blind us to the continuities between land dispossession, slavery, migration control, and overseas expropriation of nature. I disrupt the commonsensical character of the domestic and the global by showing

[3] This path to theorizing racial capitalism is not the only one possible. Anibal Quijano's framework of the coloniality of power offers an alternative framework with many affinities with the one I pursue. Quijano positions race as "the fundamental criterion for the distribution of the world population into ranks, places, and roles in the new society's structure of power" through labor control. Labor came to be organized in multiple forms, which included slavery and serfdom but also modes entailing reciprocity and/or based on wages. Quijano, moreover, diagnoses these sociological and historical formations as novel and articulated with the capitalist production of commodities for the world market, even though they were also structured around local conditions. Anibal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," *Nepantla* 1, no. 3 (2000): 535.

that racial and possessive forms of popular sovereignty organize both realms, thus transforming, but not overcoming, imperial structures of mobility and labor control, which continue to structure subjection and global struggles in the present.

Notably, this mutual articulation entails social separateness, i.e., the disjuncture or deactivation of relations between humans and humans and nature that stand in the way of capitalist accumulation. Thus, articulation is best understood as a multidimensional process of separation/interconnection. First, capitalism works through technologies of antirelationality or partition to extract subjects from collectives that are life- and nature-sustaining to then conscript them into unequal and separate functions determined by race, whose interrelation advances capital accumulation.[4]

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. This reconfiguration must disconnect existing circuits of accumulation and reconnect collectives through a new language of popular sovereignty and emancipation that is not organized around racially exclusive communities sustained by the twin extraction of racialized nature and labor for profit. Only these new arrangements can recast politics as the search for a racially-egalitarian, socially-centered, and nature-regenerative democratic solution to exploitation and violence. Such a future would break off the parceling out of responsibility entailed by the organization of the world in sovereign states and envision a popular emancipatory discourse that encompasses the transnational dialogue and joint action of radical movements of Indigenous, Black-diasporic, migrant, and expropriated groups around the world.

DEMOCRACY, DOMINATION, AND TRANSNATIONALISM

Democracy and Empire contributes to the imagining and charting of alternative futures by clarifying the forms of entanglement, the continuities in forms of subjection, and the nodes of connection between apparently distinct realms of racial oppression. It then ties these formations

[4] Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Fatal Couplings of Power and Difference: Notes on Racism and Geography," *The Professional Geographer* 54, no. 1 (2002): 161, Jodi Melamed, "Racial Capitalism," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015): 78, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Partition," *Keynote at Decolonize the City! Decoloniale Perspektiven auf die Neoliberal Stadt* September 21–23 (2012): cited in Melamed, "Racial Capitalism."

to the efforts of dominant *democratic polities* to moderate the effects of capitalism over themselves, while reinforcing hierarchies to delimit the reach of any gains attained. This is accomplished both by denying full subjectivity to racialized subjects and by conscripting these same subjects *and* nature to intensively exploitative conditions to boost their *common*wealth. This book thus theorizes both the articulation between racial regimes of capitalist oppression and their connection to popular sovereignty. In terms of the regimes of exploitation, Indigenous land dispossession created the "need" for enslaved labor, whose freeing led to the import of indentured labor from India and China, whose ban in the early twentieth century intensified the use of brown labor in the United States, also intensified by internal migration and the abandonment of farm work by emancipated Black laborers in the United States. These *needs* respond to capitalist accumulation priorities but are shaped by a racialized politics of white emancipation that partakes of the gains from and contributes to the organization of despotic rule over economically racialized others to separate them from the riches they produce.

By linking popular sovereignty as a form of government to the extraction of forced racialized labor and nature that is its condition of possibility in practice, this framework conceptually and historically links problems of exploitative work to political problems of rule. This means that 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.[5] In so doing, *Democracy and Empire* integrates several literatures that tend to analyze popular sovereignty, empire, labor, immigration, ecology, and racial capitalism in isolation from one another. The study of these regimes as self-contained or exclusive of each other limits our understanding of the global past and present. These realms operate in coordination

[5] This concern animates recent contributions in critical theory, including Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015), Regina Kreide, "Democracy in Crisis: Why Political Philosophy Needs Social Theory," in *Transformations of Democracy: Crisis, Protest, and Legitimation*, ed. Regina Kreide Robin Celikates, and Tilo Wesche (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), Nancy Fraser and Rahel Jaeggi, *Capitalism: A Conversation in Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018). See critical readings by Antonio Y. Vázquez-Arroyo, "Refurbishing Liberal Democracy?: On Wendy Brown's Undoing the Demos," *Theory & Event* 20, no. 2 (2017), Samuel A. Chambers, "Undoing Neoliberalism: Homo Œconomicus, Homo Politicus, and the Zōon Politikon," *Critical Inquiry* 44, no. 4 (2018), Lisa Tilley and Robbie Shilliam, "Raced Markets: An Introduction," *New Political Economy* 23, no. 5 (2018).

and according to continuous logics, responding to popularly supported demands to appropriate resources to sustain white groups' lives and well-being. This book traces how these regimes are synchronously articulated with each other but also reveals their dynamism and rearticulation following moments of partial liberation, geopolitical crisis, and – ultimately – the onset of neoliberalism. In the rest of this Introduction, I explicate further how and why this divide is theoretically distortive and re-join at the seams these realms of study to produce a more whole, as well as transnational, picture of racial capitalist oppression and (post) imperial popular politics.

THEORIZING THE MATERIAL INSIDE/OUTSIDE OF POPULAR SOVEREIGNTY

Democracy and Empire intervenes in the dynamic literature that addresses how concepts and practices of sovereignty, US democracy, freedom, and the political are limited by settler projects and/or the systematic exclusion of slaves and their descendants.[6] This point is also sustained by scholars of white democracy and the racial contract, who consider western democratic formations *Herrenvolk* democracies, where peoples collectively agree to exclude racialized others from a community of reciprocity, an account more recently extended to encompass the global.[7]

My focus on popular sovereignty and self-determination as curtailed principles of collective organization echoes these concerns but substantially expands the purview of the inquiry. First, to accounts that acknowledge the global character of white supremacy as an institution and circulating ideology, this book adds a more careful conceptualization of the political character of this rule and its material background. In so doing, it directly addresses and problematizes the predominant theorization of popular sovereignty and self-determination in isolation from

[6] See, respectively, the accounts of Joan Cocks, Adam Dahl, Aziz Rana, and Karena Shaw. Karena Shaw, *Indigeneity and Political Theory: Sovereignty and the Limits of the Political* (London: Routledge, 2008), Aziz Rana, *The Two Faces of American Freedom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), Joan Cocks, *On Sovereignty and Other Political Delusions* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), Adam Dahl, *Empire of the People: Settler Colonialism and the Foundations of Modern Democratic Thought* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2018).

[7] Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), Charles W. Mills, "Race and Global Justice," in *Empire, Race, and Global Justice*, ed. Duncan Bell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), Joel Olson, *The Abolition of White Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

its entanglements with despotic global orientations and racial capitalism. Specifically, the book connects these two core political concepts to the coercive organization and extraction of labor, land, and resources for social reproduction; these are both incorporated into capitalist circuits of accumulation and make possible white democracies' collective political claims. To do this, I rely on a more expansive archive than previously engaged, including the reading of canonical scholars in the Black radical tradition, imperial archives, and the historiography of moments when imperial structures smoothly metamorphose into domestically grounded "democratic" regimes. In tracing the intersection of democratic and imperial moments and structures, I follow Lisa Lowe in tracking the "intimacies of four continents," that is, the relationality and differentiation of peoples and their contemporaneity, thus traversing distinct and separately studied areas.[8] I extend the study of these intimacies by centering the *politics* of these moments of imbrication between different racialized groups, their mobilities, and their location within the division of labor. I theorize the moments of reorganization of these groups vis-à-vis each other, and the continuous but distinct institutional mechanisms of marginalization and labor control that target them. Finally, in this reconstruction, I further integrate questions of migration and ecology into the frameworks of popular sovereignty, racial capitalism, and empire, two pressing contemporary issues that are relatively overlooked within these traditions.

Thus, the critical reading of the entanglement between democracy and empire proposed here could not be further from the well-known analysis of this couplet by British liberals at the turn of the century. While these scholars did critique the claim that empire was guided by a beneficent spirit to teach the British "arts of governance," they did not delve into the hierarchy that grounded the supposed need for such a transfer.[9] Most importantly, J. A. Hobson did not turn his critical eye toward self-governing colonies themselves, highlighting them instead as

[8] Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 5–6.

[9] Leonard T. Hobhouse, "Democracy and Empire," *The Speaker*, October 18 (1902): 76, Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study*, 116–17. See also further discussion of this question in Chapter 1 on "democratic despotism" and Robert Gooding-Williams's comparative reading of Du Bois and Hobson, which highlights the former's departure from the latter's trust in trade unionism and socialism as the path to ending "the new imperialism." Robert Gooding-Williams, "Democratic Despotism and New Imperialism," in *Abolition & Democracy*, ed. Bernard Harcourt (New York: Columbia Center for Contemporary Critical Thought, 2020).

exceptional within the British Empire because rather than being ruled autocratically, they were ruled by "responsible representative government" and thus were the one space where true democratic government within empire was taking place.[10] In contrast, the analysis that follows argues that self-governing settler colonies exhibited the most duplicitous forms of imperial democracy. This form obscured their dependence on the dispossession of Indigenous peoples and slave labor, and gradually went on to expand the reach of its formal or informal dependence on their own imperial possessions, all the while developing a democratic discourse of self-government and popular sovereignty whose seductive power exceeded Hobson and other liberals of his generation. This book argues that this political form is not an aberration but the single most prevalent regime in the western world, worth studying and conceptualizing because its reconstruction is necessary for undoing it, that is, in order to re-theorize popular sovereignty in ways that can dismantle its imperial form.

Because the claims of the emancipation of an increasingly vocal white working class at the turn of the century demanded access to imperial wealth, their aspiration cannot be separated from the exploitation of nonwhite workers and nature that this entailed. So even while British settler colonies and the United States came to be seen as progressive and democratic projects that eschewed the autocratic features of the other British dominions, these collectives were outwardly despotic because they depended on stolen land, enslaved labor, and other imperial forms of extraction. In European metropoles, meanwhile, colonial wealth and migration to settler colonies were also explicitly conceived of by elites and working-class leaders as vehicles for social enfranchisement and upward mobility for the impoverished.[11] Acknowledging these entanglements

[10] J. A. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study* (New York: Gordon Press, 1975 [1902]), 114–15, Duncan Bell, *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 357. This recasting of settler colonies as promising sites of representative democracy and progressivism takes place at the turn of the century, as Duncan Bell and Marilyn Lake note. Bell, *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire*, Marilyn Lake, *Progressive New World: How Settler Colonialism and Transpacific Exchange Shaped American Reform* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019).

[11] As Paul Hindenburg, who would preside over Germany from 1925, put it: "Without colonies no security regarding the acquisition of raw materials, without raw materials no industry, without industry no adequate standard of living and wealth. Therefore, Germans, do we need colonies." Cited in Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), 98. See also Chapter 2.

requires thinking anew about the material underpinnings of popular sovereignty, and investigating how declarations of peoplehood are imbricated with affective attachments to wealth and status enabled by imperialism. Imperialism, as a form of outward domination, is the "very means of existence" of racial capitalism, meaning that dominant capitalist countries depend on the "assured complement of backward areas and their resources."[12] Thus, embedding collective declarations of peoplehood in empire means detailing their dependence on transnational networks of mobility and racial capitalist extraction that resulted in a variety of political formations facilitating these flows. Hence, the goal is not to reconstruct a bounded or harmonious whole, but the combined waves of political domination, instances of partial liberation, and the racial ideologies that supported them, all of which operated and operate transnationally to support imperial democracies. This focus on democracy and the imperial political formations that supported its material basis through capitalist accumulation is sympathetic with but distinct from Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò's Global Racial Empire, which names the "global economic structure," whose basis was racism and colonialism, and the resulting *social* system of "linked cumulative advantage and disadvantage processes."[13] By centering popular politics, *Democracy and Empire* brings home the imbrication between imperial capitalism and *political* languages and institutions of democratic government, including popular sovereignty, self-determination as a founding principle of international order, regimes of migration control, and alienation from nature as key aspects of modern democracies.

My approach also contrasts with accounts of people-making that explore moments of constitution of the people and the transformation of the multitude into a political collective. Even if these approaches do not minimize the violence and decisionism that are contained in these moments of constitution, their focus on undecidability leaves out what precisely these violent structures amount to, and why the multitude happens to be racist, two facets at the core of this book's account.[14] As such,

[12] Oliver C. Cox, *Capitalism as a System* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1964), 136.
[13] Olúfhemi O. Táíwò, *Reconsidering Reparations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 23–31.
[14] See also Ben McKean's critique of Laclau's failure to account for and problematize the attachments to racist populist discourse and the form of subjectivity entailed. "Toward an Inclusive Populism? On the Role of Race and Difference in Laclau's Politics," *Political Theory* 44(6), 814.

these approaches are less interested in connecting this violence to race or the imperial wealth that the people – once constituted – appropriates.[15] Other approaches theorize the people as a process which both moors state institutions and allows for "change, surprise, and innovation," thus solving the problem of indeterminacy.[16] A processual account, however, cannot easily accommodate changes that require dismantling the dependence of the previously enfranchised group on those excluded and rebuilding polities in a transnational key, as this book argues is necessary, because in such cases the turning upside down of the people's foundations is required for any broad emancipation. Scholars also focus on popular assemblies as privileged sites of political representation and moments in which rebellious aspirations to share power in egalitarian ways are cultivated.[17] Yet the possibility of nurturing these moments requires us to understand that aspirations to share power and access to wealth too often depend on conscripting others to satisfy the people's well-being. None of these approaches, moreover, puzzle over the fact that the power and well-being that popular movements wish to access in the wealthy world requires transnational networks of exploitation as a condition of possibility. These shortcomings mean that, by not theorizing its material background, theories of popular sovereignty hide the very substance of what the people aim to access and distribute, and the relationship political subjects establish with the labor and natural resources that sustain them as a collective. Was this entanglement possessive and extractive, or reciprocal and regenerative? If the former, then popular sovereignty becomes the means to distribute ill-gotten gains, and omitting this feature disavows the imperial projects that boundedly progressive movements support (see Chapter 2). Instead, *Democracy and Empire* theorizes this imperially truncated form of emancipation as a proper form, one worth studying to better understand it and how it could be dismantled. This account of imperial

[15] Bonnie Honig, "Between Decision and Deliberation: Political Paradox in Democratic Theory," *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 1 (2007). For other critiques of this approach see Antonio Y. Vázquez-Arroyo, "Agonized Liberalism. The Liberal Theory of William E. Connolly," *Radical Philosophy* 127, Sep/Oct (2004), Regina Kreide's "Democracy in Crisis: Why Political Philosophy Needs Social Theory," 42–43.

[16] Paulina Ochoa Espejo, *The Time of Popular Sovereignty: Process and the Democratic State* (University Park: Penn State Press, 2011).

[17] Jason Frank, *Constituent Moments* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), Laura Grattan, *Populism's Power: Radical Grassroots Democracy in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), Jason Frank, *The Democratic Sublime: On Aesthetics and Popular Assembly* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).