



BOOK SYMPOSIUM ON *HOME RULE: NATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY  
AND THE SEPARATION OF NATIVES AND MIGRANTS* BY  
NANDITA SHARMA

**The Making and the Undoing of “Migration”  
Towards an Abolitionist Horizon**

**Martina Tazzioli**

*Goldsmiths University of London*

[Martina.Tazzioli@gold.ac.uk](mailto:Martina.Tazzioli@gold.ac.uk)

The racialization of some individuals as “migrants” is reiterated everywhere and is differently enacted according to the geopolitical context and national laws. Indeed, the question “who is a migrant?” cannot be answered unless we add *where* and *when*. Far from being fixed once for all, who is criminalized and turned into an “undeserving migrant” changes over time. Nandita Sharma’s seminal book, *Home Rule: National Sovereignty and the Separation of Natives and Migrants* (Sharma 2020) traces the genealogy of the making of migration and its permutability over time in relation to the emergence of the categories of “the native” and of “the citizen.” Nowadays, para-legal and political categories—such as undeserving refugees, undeserving migrants and bogus refugees—are used for discrediting, racializing and preventively excluding foreigners. Laws, administrative measures, policies, and public discourses contribute to craft and



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define who is a migrant here and now, and to establish racialized hierarchies of (un)deservingness. A case in point is represented by Syrian nationals who in 2015 were considered “the yardstick of humanitarianism” (Tazzioli 2019: 137), and were easily granted international protection in Europe. Six years later, the scenario has changed considerably and Syrians are often told to be as non-genuine refugees and many are in the end denied of the refugee status. In fact, the EU-Turkey Deal signed in 2016 was crafted for preventively illegalizing Syrian asylum seekers, during what states declared a “refugee crisis” in Europe.

The Algerian sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad famously stated that “thinking about immigration means thinking about the state” (Sayad 1999: 6). Sharma’s book follows to some extent that intellectual pathway, retracing the history of the mutually entangled relationship between state formation and the emergence of the category of “migrants”: indeed, as she states, while “‘Migrant’ was originally an imperial-state category” it then became “a key ideological underpinning for the nationalization of states and their sovereignty” (Sharma 2020: 75). At the same time, Sharma’s book pushes Sayad’s argument forward, highlighting how studying the nation state means studying the emergence of the categories of “the migrant” and “the native” and their regulatory function: “immigration and citizenship controls become crucial technologies for nation-making (and nation-maintaining) strategies” (Sharma 2020: 3). Thus, the mutually intertwined history of the emergence of migration controls and nation states has been since its start rooted in imperial legacies.

According to Sharma, the British Empire was the first to introduce the categories of “Indigenous-Natives” and “Migrant-Natives” and to present them as in opposition to each “as part of efforts to maintain imperial rule in the face of a heated resistance from the collectivity of Natives” (Sharma 2020: 36). Therefore, retracing the history of *the making of migration* and its ongoing permutability involves engaging with “the intimacies of the empire” (Lowe 2015). The making of migration is formed also by the birth of statistics about migration—and international migration in particular. As Yann Stricker has reconstructed, the statistical category of “international migration” has a clear colonial and imperial genealogy: indeed, it was introduced by the International Labour Office in 1920s and “led to the construction of an international point of view on migration” (Stricker 2019: 482), which differed from the British imperial approach based on the category of overseas settlement. By reconstructing the political-economic function of “migrants” and of racialized mobility controls, Sharma does not only foreground the consolidation of the “migrant”/“native” and “migrant”/“citizen” partitions; she also highlights the emergence of related problematic dichotomy, such as between “forced” and “voluntary” migration.

### **Multiplying Bordering Mechanisms and Hierarchies of Mobility**

*Home Rule* focuses on state-based restrictions over people’s movements and the centrality of migration controls for establishing and securing a disciplined and functional labor force. Indeed, “the history of the border regime “has always also and simultaneously been a labor and mobility regime” (Altenried et al. 2018: 293). *Home Rule* shows this very clearly, showing how political

concerns about maintaining state’s sovereignty have historically intersected with the need of regulating and exploiting foreigners’ labor force. Indeed, “the first controls placed on the movement of Native “coolies” from British India in 1835 were highly influential for future immigration controls” (Sharma 2020: 63). In so doing, Sharma unsettles monolithic analyses of the border regime predicated on state-based logic: the fact that the history of mobility controls is also the history of the consolidation of nation states does not mean that the migrantization of some subjects served exclusively for exercising states’ sovereignty. Rather, it was also crucial for subordinating labor force and creating racialized hierarchies among workers.

Yet, is the binary opposition between “migrants” and “natives” sufficient to account for the degrees and hierarchies of racialized mobility? And how to register heterogenous bordering mechanisms not narrowed to national frontiers? If it is true that the opposition between “natives” and “migrants” underpins populist movements across the world, at the same time the multiplication of degrees of legal and economic destitution crisscross the divide between migrants and citizens. Ultimately, concurring with Sharma’s contention that a decolonial project involves undoing and disengaging from the categories of “native,” “migrant,” and “citizen,” as part of such a project it is likewise crucial to come to grips with degrees of racialized subjectivities that are not circumscribed to binary oppositions. In this respect, “humanitarian frontiers” (Walters 2011) and the related degrees of (un)deservingness. A case in point is represented by ongoing reshuffling of racialization of would-be refugees in Europe. Indeed, in the last six years there has been a shift in public discourse from partitioning between “deserving refugees” and migrants (or “bogus refugees”) towards a criminalization of refugees as refugees and, at once, a change in the racialized hierarchies of people deserving protection—for example, as I mentioned above about Syrian nationals.

At the same time, degrees of precarity among citizens and the relative migrantization of some of them have been strengthened through economic austerity programs and progressive governing through debt (Anderson 2020). By speaking of heterogenous bordering mechanisms I refer to an array of bordering technologies that include both visible and invisible racializing partitioning mechanisms, such as temporal borders that delay migrants and steal their time or force them to comply with multiple deadlines (Khosravi 2018), digital borders that are enacted through the datafication of mobility and technologies of mobility control, humanitarian bordering mechanisms entangled with security practices. To be clear, some of these bordering processes, not narrowed to state-driven restrictions, are not only in the present. In fact, the history of technologies of mobility control is deeply intertwined with the birth of the nation state and with colonial legacies. For instance, the use of biometric technology to control and classify a population was first implemented in colonial India in 1858 by William Herschel; and few decades later, in the 1880s, it started to be used in Europe to profile and identify individuals: in particular, fingerprinting was unfolded “at different scales of empire, involving state and non-state actors” (Maguire 2009: 11)

Hence, an investigation into heterogenous bordering mechanisms involves a multiplicity of the epistemic and political hooks for engaging in a decolonial approach to state categories. For instance, the reiteration of the partition between deserving and undeserving migrants is at the core

of the acceptability of the very institution of (migrant) detention, as carceral abolitionist scholars stress (Gilmore 2007; Davis 2016). The methodological and epistemic tools that Sharma's book equips us with might be mobilized, I suggest, for grasping and challenging heterogenous racialized bordering mechanisms that are not classified as migration controls nor as state-driven mobility restrictions. This allows studying how migrants are turned into sources of value production and value extraction. In fact, the capitalization over "migrants" takes place in different manners. These include both the direct economic profit made as part of the so called "migration industry," value extracted from the circulation of data extracted from migrants, as well as invisible unpaid labor activities that asylum seekers are pushed to do. Thus, raising the question of the making of migration, of who is turned into a migrant in the present, involves rethinking processes of value extraction and exploitation in migration governmentality.

### **Undoing States Categories, Crafting Border Abolition Horizons:**

*Home Rule* equips us with analytical lenses for addressing the question "who is a migrant here and now?" situating it within a longer genealogy of the making of migration. At once, the book implicitly paves the ground for an abolitionist approach to borders that supplements and is intertwined with a NoBorder perspective: indeed, this latter, Sharma contends, is an essential and "first step toward decolonization" (Sharma 2020: 276), as long as collective liberation cannot be reached without equality in freedom of movement. Thus, while Sharma directly engages with NoBorder politics, the book also invites intertwining claims for freedom of movement with abolitionist views that, I suggest, should be pushed further in critical migration scholarship. *Home Rule* gestures towards a decolonial politics which involves undoing the state categories of "migrant" and "native" and racialized hierarchies of mobility. A collective liberatory project cannot stop to struggles against national borders and mobility restrictions: rather, it entails tracing connections between interlocking forms of racialization that target migrants and citizens, while at the same time challenges the binary opposition between "migrants" and "citizens. A border abolitionist analytics, I suggest, complements a NoBorder perspective by focusing the analysis on the economy of illegality and the production of illegality continuum, and by shifting attention from discrete borders to heterogenous racializing bordering mechanisms. In fact, tracing a genealogy of the *making of migration* is the first step for engaging in the operation of *undoing* the category of "migrant" as well as the oppositions migrant/native/citizen.

Yet, the epistemic and political task of undoing state categories cannot be disjoined from tactics through which individuals might appropriate, claims and twist these latter. Disidentifying with the categories of "migrants" and "national citizens," as Sharma claims, is certainly the starting point of a decolonial collective politics. Nevertheless, terms like these—and related ones, like "refugee"—might be put to work also for claiming the right to stay in a place or to protection. Indeed, the heterogeneity of bordering mechanisms also amplifies the diversity of political tactics, claims, and vocabulary used by those racialized as "migrants" as well as by people acting in solidarity with them. A decolonial politics oriented towards border abolitionism consists of

drawing attention to transversal alliances of solidarity and the history of migrant struggles, accounting for the claims they have mobilized in different contexts in order to advocate for freedom of movement.

**About the Author: Martina Tazzioli** is Lecturer in Politics & Technology at Goldsmiths. She is the author of *The Making of Migration: The biopolitics of mobility at Europe’s borders* (Sage, 2019), *Spaces of Governmentality: Autonomous Migration and the Arab Uprisings* (2015) and co-author with Glenda Garelli of *Tunisia as a Revolutionised Space of Migration* (2016). She is on the editorial board of journal *Radical Philosophy* and editor of the journal *Politics*.

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