RETHINKING THE POLITICAL COMMUNITY:
VIOLENCE AND THE COLONIAL MAKING
OF THE MODERN NATION STATE

Mahmood MAMDANI, *Neither Settler nor Native:*
The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities
(Cambridge Mass., Harvard University Press, 2020, 416 p.)

> For Europe, for ourselves and for humanity, comrades, we must turn over
> a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new ma
> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*[1]

Nearly two decades ago, Mahmood Mamdani made the case that the South African experience offers an epistemic viewpoint from which we can see the world. More than simply theorizing processes of colonialism and post-colonialism, he argued that the African vantage point offers an epistemic window into the world, one that makes visible a set of social structures that would otherwise be obscured. All knowledge comes from somewhere and, paraphrasing Donna Haraway, seeking a universal vantage point is simply the business of God [Haraway 1988[2]]. Yet genealogies of political modernity have often been presented as universal stories, even though they largely represent a Eurocentric perspective. What then would an alternative genealogy of political modernity, one that looks at the world through the South African experience, look like? Mahmood Mamdani's new book provides an answer to this question.

Neither Settler nor Native: The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities dismantles some of social sciences' core assumptions about political modernity, citizenship, and the formation of the nation-state. In a sweeping global analysis, Mamdani troubles conventional narratives of the origins and character of the modern nation state. Narratives beginning with the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia have often described the modern nation state as a tolerant and secular political institution, overcoming European religious strife. Tocquevillian accounts of American democracy have tended to highlight a consensus-based pluralistic model, while dismissing the concurrent racial oppression and attempted

[1] Frantz FANON, 2004, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York, Grove/Atlantic).
[2] Donna HARAWAY, 1988, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist studies*, 14 (3): 575–599.

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indigenous genocide as mere "exceptions" to an otherwise democratic nation. These readings, Mamdani makes clear, erase the forces of conquest, genocide, and settler colonialism, and hence cannot account for the centrality of colonial domination in the making of the modern nation state. He proposes that the modern nation did not come *after* colonialism; but rather, that colonial domination and violent conquest co-constituted the modern nation state.

Offering a counter-story, Mamdani begins his genealogy in 1492, with the conquest of the Americas, and he then homes in on the settler colonial experiment of the United States. The United States, he argues, became a model for colonial rule by imposing a two-state solution: settlers created the nation alongside a permanent internal colony—the reservation. In a quest for land, settlers dispossessed the indigenous populations through attempted genocide, and employed a set of colonial governance tools, including customary law, customary authority, and the construction of tribal homelands. These ruling technologies were often legitimized through an ideology of "preserving tradition." Colonial domination inscribed political subjects not in a reign of pluralism and tolerance, but in the hierarchical binary construction of civilized/uncivilized, one that demarcated the boundaries of the national body politic. What is more, despite and perhaps because of this foundational violence at the heart of the US settler colonial project, this history is silenced in the conventional self-narratives about the United States. In Mamdani's words, "They have written the native out of the autobiography of the settler" [85].

Painting a picture of the violence at the heart of political modernity, this book offers a powerful and important intervention in the sociology of citizenship. The sociology of citizenship has largely assumed that the nation overlaps with the territory of the state. As a result, it has obscured the colonial and racial politics that place subjects outside the bounds of the nation and the community of rights-bearing citizens. Thinking of exclusions as "exceptions" and of the excluded as "groups" risks portraying identities as essentialized, naturalized *faits accomplis*, while obscuring and erasing the violent historical processes that constructed these exclusions in the first place. Colonial governance strategies rest on fragmentation and tribalization, whereby the law and colonial discourses give identities meaning by positioning them *in relation to* the state project. As a result, without reading the making of political identities through this history of colonial rule, we misattribute the origins of this violence, we naturalize identities under the guise of highlighting tradition, and we construct the nation as an inalienable, always already existing artefact.

Mamdani instead aims "to understand colonisation as the making of permanent minorities and their maintenance through the politicisation of identity, which leads to political violence—in some cases extreme violence" [18]. At heart, this book stakes a profound claim: political modernity is an epistemic condition. It is held in place at once through the exclusionary imposition of citizenship alongside the making of colonial subjecthood, but also through an investment in a particular world view: a political imagination that determines who belongs to a political community. Majorities define themselves as within the body politic and demarcate it to keep "permanent" minorities out, while this "permanence" is held in place through naturalizing the nation state. In short, political modernity came about through a process of colonial violence, and these structures continue to shape modern politics today.

Weaving a global conversation, the book provides five case studies that serve as lenses into how colonial politics constructs identities and designates populations as expendable. Mamdani writes: "Ethnic cleansing unites the examples in this book: the United States, which perpetrated both genocide and population transfer against American Indians; Germany, which perpetrated genocide against Jews and was in turn victimised by Allied population transfers following the Second World War; South Africa, where white settlers forced blacks into tribal homelands known as Bantustans; Sudan, where the British segregated Arabs and Africans into separate homelands; and Palestine, where Zionist settlers forcibly exiled and concentrated non-Jews, an ongoing process" [4]. Some cases are directly linked in a transfer of colonial governance technologies, with the United States providing inspiration for Apartheid South Africa and Nazi Germany. Positioning these case studies side by side has important theoretical implications. It dismantles the myth of American exceptionalism by shifting it from a model democracy within the liberal imaginary to the central experiment of settler colonial governance. With the inclusion of post-independence Sudan, Mamdani overcomes the supposed break between a colonial past and a national present. He shows how the politicization of ethnicity, which was imparted through the British colonial project, continues to shape post-colonial national projects and post-independence violence. The chapters on Germany and Israel/Palestine in turn explicate how support for Zionism became a way for Europe to avoid confronting the colonial modernity of the Holocaust, while exporting settler violence and imposing an apartheid state on Palestinians.

Up to this point, Mamdani paints a convincing trajectory of the modern nation state and its violent implications. The book's critique of

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much traditional scholarship on citizenship and liberal democracy is truly compelling and offers a new framework for analysis. But this history also poses a central question: where do we go from here? Mamdani's answer: decolonize the political. "Decolonizing the political means upsetting the permanent majority and minority identities that define the contours of the nation-state. The idea of the nation-state naturalises majority and minority identities, justifying their permanence. I aim, therefore, to historicise these identities that are taken as natural" [19]. Decolonizing the political, for Mamdani, involves the rejection of colonially imposed identities, the transformation of fragmentation into solidarity between oppressed groups, the reimagination of a political community beyond the strictures of the national community, and the overcoming of foundational political violence.

The book calls on us to decolonize our political imagination. And it is here where I seek to think with Mamdani and point to three limitations. My first question concerns cultural politics and the absence of politics from below. Despite the book's focus on the rearticulation of political subjectivities to disrupt colonial logics, it does not tell us very much about the epistemic struggles that have historically been so central to anticolonial struggles. Exceptions are a few riveting pages on Steve Biko's critical contribution to the anti-apartheid movement. In the face of colonial fragmentation, the Black Consciousness Movement brought together non-white people in one symbolic block: "If you are oppressed, you are Black." This construction of solidarity, Mamdani explains, was a central turning point in anti-apartheid movements. Yet, despite the importance of self-articulation and the decolonization of political imaginaries in Mamdani's theoretical framework, the long history of anticolonial struggle is largely absent in the book. For instance, Haitian Revolutionaries, as early as 1805, refused the racialized hierarchies of their French overseers and "decolonized the political" in declaring that "Haytians shall hence forward be known only by the generic appellation of Blacks" (1805 Constitution, Article 14]. The history of remaking worlds beyond colonial categories is long, and we would be amiss if we failed to stand on these revolutionary shoulders.

Mamdani does refer to anticolonial thought, but at times, he seems to reduce anticolonial thought to the proponents of national political independence, perhaps best exemplified in Nkrumah's call to "seek ye first a political kingdom." But this was simply one strand in a varied political and intellectual tradition: other thinkers, political leaders and revolutionaries were deeply invested in producing a world beyond the model of the nation state, and thought through political forms that do not

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reproduce the colonial categories of Europe [Getachew 2019[3]]. What is more, much of anticolonial thought has extricated the possibilities of self-articulation and highlighted the question of representation. "In the World through which I travel," Fanon wrote, "I am endlessly creating myself" [Fanon 2008: 229[4]]. These creative possibilities are central to overcoming colonially inscribed identities, and they provide the foundation from which we can begin to reimagine the political. While the book tends to look for political possibilities in formal reconciliation politics, the view from below may provide more answers.

Another limitation within the realm of cultural politics is Mamdani's stance towards nationalism. In his theoretical model, nationalism was co-constituted with the colonial project, and therefore serves as a vehicle for exclusionary practices and indeed, as a legitimation for political violence. But how can we make sense of nationalisms that serve as a basis for solidarity and as tools for self-determination in the face of colonial domination? In 2021 and after the publication of the book, Palestinians rose in a unified struggle against Israeli occupation. They rejected the Israeli fragmentation of their differential legal statuses and entered a united struggle that brought together Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, Palestinian refugees, and Palestinian citizens of Israel. Palestinian nationalism has a long history, predating the dispossession of their lands, and has long served as a powerful repertoire for solidarity in the face of colonial oppression. Can nationalist struggle not be another form of reconceptualizing the "we" in the face of violence?

A second question, which requires more examination than the book provides is the relationship between the social and the political. Here, Mamdani takes us to South Africa to think through the achievements as well as limitations of the anti-apartheid movement. On the one hand, Mamdani concedes that post-apartheid South Africa reproduced many of the social inequalities of the apartheid regime. On the other hand, he insists that reconciliation after apartheid nevertheless represents one of the most important post-colonial reimaginations of the political community. This point is particularly clear when he contrasts the South African political process to deal with violence with the denazification attempts of post-War Germany. German denazification took the form of *criminalizing* violence, such as the individualized punishment of perpetrators, thereby rendering violence a question of individual failure. In this model,

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[3] Adom GETACHEW, 2019, *Worldmaking after Empire* (Princeton, Princeton University Press).

[4] Frantz FANON, 2008, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London, Pluto Press).

he explains, states cannot commit crimes, and violence is seen as an "exception," "transgression" and "excess," rather than the norm. In contrast, the political process of post-apartheid South Africa, from the Black Consciousness Movement to CODESA, considered violence as central to the political order. South Africans understood that political institutions and community had to be transformed: if violence is the norm, they worked to upend political institutional logics and the racist narratives that had made this violence thinkable.

Mamdani emphasizes that political transformations must precede social transformations. In other words, demands for redistribution must center a transformation of who is included in the political community, lest these movements fall back into exclusionary practices. However, in emphasizing the importance of political transformation, Mamdani separates out the need for social transformation. This is particularly striking because in his own description of colonial modernity, the social and the political work in tandem: for instance, land dispossession as a *social* process requires the *political* construction of the expendable population. If colonial governance is a project of rule as much as it is a process of land dispossession, enslavement, and exploitation, why should we divorce the question of political subjectivities from the very social relations they helped to establish, stabilize, and reproduce? In short, the questions of "who belongs?" and "how do we distribute wealth?" [34] are linked in a condition of colonial modernity; their separation is meaningless. "The cause is effect," writes Fanon, "you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich." If the symbolic and the material reinforce one another, then the undoing of colonial domination should require the rejection of colonial identities just as much as their material and social worlds. Paradoxically, even though Mamdani rightfully seeks to counter T.H. Marshall's genealogy of rights, he ends up reimposing the Marshallian separation between the social and the political through the backdoor.

An alternative starting point may be W.E.B. Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction in America*. While Mamdani's focus on settler colonial structures of the United States is important, in drawing attention to their silencing, he also de-emphasizes the centrality of chattel slavery in the United States and globally. The enslaved were property-in-person [Goveia 1970[5]], and thus excluded from the political community

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[5] Elsa GOVEIA, 1970, "West Indian Slave Laws of the 18th Century," *in* D. Hall, E. Goveia and F. Roy Augier, eds, *Chapters in Caribbean History*, 2 (Barbados, Caribbean Universities Press).

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(and in fact, the category of humanity), and they were exploited. If therefore, we include in our genealogy the subjectivities of the enslaved, as Du Bois does, then the project of decolonizing the political cannot be conceptualized without the decolonization of the social. Du Bois makes clear that the failures of Reconstruction were failures to reimagine the political community: "The beginnings of the present failure of democracy in America was the repudiation of the democratic process in the case of Black American citizens in the South" [Du Bois 1954[6]]. While Mamdani often dismisses Black politics as aiming for civic inclusion or even assimilation, Du Bois in fact provides a model that aims for both, the decolonization of the political as well as the social. He puts forth the idea of "abolition-democracy" based on "freedom, intelligence and power for all men" [Du Bois 1998: 82[7]]. Yet, crucially, Du Bois does not only think through the rearticulation of racialized identities and the reimagination of the body politic, but for him, the construction of abolition-democracy is intimately connected to the redistribution of land, and questions of labor and education. Thinking from this perspective makes clear that any form of true decolonization cannot isolate the political from the social. This insight also applies for colonial subjects who continue to struggle for their land and for social justice up to this day.

This brings me to my third point, the relationship between violence and democracy. Mamdani draws important lessons from the South African political reform process: it entailed institutional change, but it also put forth a reimagined community of belonging. Mamdani argues that the re-imagined political community was one of *survivors*. "A survivor is anyone who experienced the catastrophe. All must be born again, politically" [194/195]. This includes "victims, perpetrators, beneficiaries, bystanders, exiles" who are all participants "in an expanded political process and reformed political community" [17]. Political decolonization cannot simply mean victim's justice but must bring together everyone in a new political community. The analysis of violence as a political, rather than individualized process is well-founded. However, I read the concept of "the survivor" as carrying static and passive connotations: it does not capture the power of movements that struggled for the end of apartheid and ended up winning a cultural politics of who "we" are.

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[6] William Edward Burghardt DU BOIS, 1954, *Democracy Fails in America* (U-Mass Library). [https://credo.library.umass.edu/cgi-bin/pdf.cgi?id=scua:mums312-b205-i003].

[7] W.E.B DU BOIS, 1998, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York City, The Free Press).

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More importantly, the language of survival seems to rely on temporal politics that reinforce the "pastness" of this violence. As such, it runs the risk of imposing exactly what Mamdani seeks to avoid: while he aims to make the case against the reinforcing the boundaries of the political community, proposing the community of "survivors" creates a new requirement for entry into the political community: belonging requires an acceptance that violence belongs to a past from which the country is politically reborn. While this may provide a powerful new imaginary, it also reproduces a separation between the past and the present that renders the question of reparative justice unthinkable. This is particularly problematic in making sense of social inequalities that are also the product of colonial modernity, the legacies of an ongoing violence and unjust past. Indeed, the temporal politics of survivorhood may directly impede the struggle against social inequality. To understand the origins and reproduction of social injustice, we rely on a consistent reminder of our historical genesis, "that the past is the present; that without what was, nothing is" [Du Bois 2007: 80[8]]. The act of *overcoming* may produce a new self-understanding of the political community, but it also risks implementing a rupture with a history that created our social institutions. In the words of Achille Mbembe, "[i]n order to enable those who were on their knees not long before, bowed down under the weight of oppression, to arise and walk, justice must be done" [2008[9]]. The temporal politics of the "survivor" present a devil's bargain, making social questions unspeakable for the political to be reborn.

The alternative is to refuse his break, and to decolonize the political community based on an understanding that all our positionalities stem from this ongoing history of colonial modernity. Rather than surviving this past, decolonization is an ongoing process. Plus, the self-articulation of those who have been excluded is simultaneously always a struggle over our joint history. "It is not really a "Negro revolution" that is upsetting the country. What is upsetting the country is a sense of its own identity," James Baldwin [2000: 127[10]] once said. This struggle over the history of the present is with us, and not one we can overcome.

Neither Settler nor Native is an inspiring intervention, and it opens questions with which we will wrestle for a long time. It presents us with a

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[8] W.E.B Du Bois, 2007, *The World and Africa. Color and Democracy: An Inquiry Into the Part Which Africa Has Played in World History*, The Oxford WEB Du Bois (Vol. 9) (New York City, Oxford University Press on Demand).

[9] Achille. Mbembe, 2008, "What is Postcolonial Thinking? An Interview with Achille Mbembe," *Eurozine* [https://www.eurozine.com/what-is-postcolonial-thinking/].

[10] James Baldwin, 2000, Chapter Eight: "A Talk to Teachers", *Counterpoints*, 107: 123-131.

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narrative of political modernity that centers the colonial institutions of indirect rule and draws together a wide set of cases that articulate the local modalities of this history. Colonial rule co-constituted the nation state, so violence is not excess but the outcome of this political order. The book masterfully points to the limits of criminalizing violence and the failures of misunderstanding the origins at the heart of ongoing colonial and post-colonial violence. It implores us to rethink the very foundations of modern political communities and sets an important agenda. The questions it raises will require collective answers, drawing from the wisdom and insights of revolutionaries who have come before us.

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