

World-Building, Democracy, and the Limits of Sovereign Mastery

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The following paper is a chapter draft from my book manuscript, *Contested Territory: A Critical Theory of Land and Democracy beyond Sovereign Bounds*. The manuscript critiques territorial sovereignty and argues that it is possible to theorize democracy within a framework of territorial *non*-sovereignty. To flesh out the imaginary of non-sovereign democracy, I resuscitate a largely forgotten tradition in the history of Western political thought: the tradition of theorizing *contested territory*.

The chapter presented here is the fifth of the following:

1. Introduction: The Sovereign Territorial Imaginary in Crisis
2. Land Grabbing and the Contradictions of Territorial Sovereignty
3. Westphalia and the Hidden Tradition of Contested Territory
4. The Other Side of Sovereignty? Hannah Arendt versus Carl Schmitt on the *Nomos* of the Earth
- 5. World-Building, Democracy, and the Limits of Sovereign Mastery**
6. Democracy in Contested Territory: On Legal Pluralism and the Territorial Principle
7. Conclusion: Toward a Right to Place

Chapter 5

World-Building, Democracy, and the Limits of Sovereign Mastery

DRAFT

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In Chapter Two, “Land Grabbing and the Contradictions of Territorial Sovereignty,” I argued that the widespread practice of land grabbing, wherein huge public landholdings are sold to private developers for agribusiness and extraction, reveals a crisis of territorial sovereignty. In land grabbing, the private interests of developers come together with those of sovereigns to dispossess and displace vulnerable communities, violently making way for ventures that are almost always posed by land-selling governments as “for the good of the people”. In reality, land grabs obliterate communities, destroy ecosystems, and make it impossible for targeted communities to exercise any semblance of control over the land they live on, or in cases of displacement, used to live on.

One question I asked is whether such land transfers constitute a wrongful alienation of territorial rule to private owner, and I found that they do, which means that governments involved in these deals are alienating their own sovereignty to private owners. But I also found that the reinstatement of alienated sovereignty—a claim that would be possible for affected inhabitants to press against their governments based on principles of international law¹—will not help establish true democratic governance of the grabbed land. Those who have lost land at the hands of global corporations have equal reason to be suspicious of their state’s sovereignty. Indeed, sovereigns have worked hard over course of modern state-building to dispossess

¹ For more on the principle of “permanent sovereignty over natural resources,” see Chapter 2.

indigenous groups and vulnerable minorities and monopolize control of land. This is not only an issue in corrupt authoritarian regimes, it also arises in what we consider to be strong democracies. Popular sovereigns have often played the role of land grabber, cannibalizing democratic participation in rule over land and resources in an effort to consolidate control of national territory.²

One concern that emerged from this investigation is that our prevailing understandings of democracy—as rule by the people, as popular sovereignty, as majority rule, as embedded in discourses and proceduralism—are ill-equipped to respond to land conflicts that bring sovereignty itself into question. Democratic theory has a geographical blind spot. Democratic theorists have debated border and immigration control at length, and yet the everyday governance of land has escaped attention. In this chapter, I go back to basics to think through the human relationship to land in order to provide a more robust account of what democracy over land requires. What would a democratic geography look like? Certainly it will not resemble the worlds engulfed in land grabs, where monocrops stretch for miles on stolen and razed lands.

In what follows, I provide foundations for an anti-sovereigntist theory of democratic *world-building*. Democratic world-building encompasses the material practices through which communities build, rebuild, negotiate, and govern their shared physical world. These practices include zoning, the regulation of infrastructure and public things, land use and food production, housing and tenancy rights, negotiation of the property regime, and the regulation of resources and ecosystems. Participation in world-building transforms the occupants of a piece of land into democratic citizens—that is, members of a political community defined by its location. These

² See especially Adam Dahl’s analysis of early American discourses of popular sovereignty as a justification for conquest and territorial expansion. Adam Dahl, *Empire of the People: Settler Colonialism and the Foundations of Modern Democratic Thought* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2018). See also {Valdez, 2022 #585}

practices ought to be included among the other more familiar requirements of democracy, e.g. voting, representation, free assembly, and deliberation. I also argue that to be democratic, world-building must shed any association with mastery and sovereignty.

One of my interlocutors is Bonnie Honig, who has argued that public things are necessary for democracy: they gather citizens together and provide durable points of orientation and shared reality.³ Honig and I converge in our materialist approach to democracy. Part of my aim here is to be more explicit about the process through which things—including land—*become* public. How do we turn the earth into a geography of shared concern, and how can this be done more or less democratically? The issue Honig and I diverge on is sovereignty. I do not believe that sovereignty is compatible with democratic governance of land. I also engage critically with theorists in the European tradition: Hannah Arendt, GWF Hegel, Jürgen Habermas, and Martin Heidegger. These thinkers aid me, often through their illuminating shortcomings, to isolate and describe elements of world-building and its emancipatory potential.

Democracy and Sovereignty

In the Introduction,⁴ I took a critical look at the dominance of what I call the *sovereign territorial imaginary*, which is a constellation of ideas about how the world should be divided up and ruled. This imaginary persuades us that modern polities are, and should be, territorial states that exercise sovereign control over a bordered land and its inhabitants.⁵ The core assumptions of the sovereign territorial imaginary, I have argued, are exclusivity of rule and mastery of land. As we saw in the crisis of land grabbing, exclusivity and mastery are often inimical to concrete

³ Bonnie Honig, *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).

⁴ “The Sovereign Territorial Imaginary in Crisis.”

⁵ In the Introduction I contrast the dominant sovereign territorial imaginary with the suppressed tradition of theorizing “contested territory.”

struggles for democratic governance of land and resources. This chapter provides a philosophical groundwork for this view.

To theorize democracy in a way that rejects the tenets of the sovereign territorial imaginary requires a shift in definition at the most basic level, from conceiving democracy as *popular sovereignty* to conceiving it as *participation in rule*.⁶ Democracy, I will argue in this chapter and the next, requires that all people living in a place (provided they are not engaged in conquest, colonization, or usurpation) have the opportunity to participate in rule, which means that they must have access to the basic activities of world-building.⁷ In order to respond to the geographical challenges of rule, we must expand our definition of democracy to include the activities of world-building among its other requirements, e.g. elections, representation, and deliberation in the public sphere. What democracy does *not* require is that a people master its boundaries—those of membership or territory—nor does it, as I discuss in the next chapter, even require a conception of “the people” *per se*.

My challenge to the many democrats who rely on the popular sovereignty concept is to ask whether we can retain our commitment to self-rule without recourse to sovereignty. Must the people be sovereign in order to rule over itself? My answer is no. As I argue in the next chapter, we do not need the framework of sovereignty to bound constituencies by territorial jurisdiction (i.e. to bound the demos), and overlapping rule is beneficial for democracy. To form the groundwork for these institutional arguments, this chapter starts with a basic question: what would it mean to live together, physically together, in a way that is free? What does it mean to be free with regard to land, and is this freedom compatible with sovereignty?

⁶ Hannah Arendt, “Nation-State and Democracy,” *Thinking without a Banister*, 2018 [1963], p.260. CITATION

⁷ In Chapter 6, “Democracy in Contested Territory,” I explain why I pose this as an individual rather than a group right.

Defining Freedom

The places where we live are continually changing. They are the outcome of the work of our hands and the politics that steer our labors. Human activities take place on the land, respond to the conditions of the land, and remake it, resulting in the creation of places. The continual process of making and remaking place, which I am calling *world-building*, can be carried out more or less democratically. The reason we ought to strive for democratic world-building is that it is intimately connected to our experience of freedom. We cannot really be free unless we have a say in the shape of the place where we live. Because the physical shape of the world constricts and determines our future prospects, behaviors, and happiness, our freedom depends on whether we have a chance to intervene world-building.

Preliminarily, I take political freedom to mean the capacity to start something anew, to act and thus to begin in the realm of politics. I take this definition from Hannah Arendt.⁸ The idea of beginning corresponds to Arendt's idea that *natality* is a human condition, which is to say that we are the type of beings who have the capacity to bring something new into the world.

Why not simply use a definition of freedom as autonomy, as other theorists of territory have?⁹ My concern with autonomy is one I share with many theorists, especially feminists, who have identified a problem with thinking about freedom as a form of control or mastery.¹⁰ *Autonomos*, to give oneself the law, must always be a fiction because we are not enough in control of the conditions around us, much less our inner conditions and desires, to exert mastery over our

⁸ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998 (1958)), 175-247; *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 142-69.

⁹ See especially Anna Stilz, *Territorial Sovereignty: A Philosophical Exploration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

¹⁰ For an overview of feminist debates on autonomy and relational autonomy, see Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, ed. *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). New materialists, many of whom are feminists, have also worked to undermine the illusion of mastery in human agency. See e.g. Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007)

lives. And since at least Hegel, we have known that our experience of freedom, and indeed of consciousness, emerges from and is tangled up in our encounters with others. Our autonomy is at the very least relational. Individual agency is not a sovereign function.¹¹ We cannot play the role of sovereign law-giver over ourselves, nor do I think it is a good idea for us to pretend that we can. What we can do is begin something new or interrupt an ongoing process and influence it. For these reasons, I find the natality concept compelling. It does not rely on the fiction of mastery and operates well in conditions of uncertainty.

Because humans are also conditioned by *plurality*—we are beings who live with others—the action that starts something new is always action in concert with others. The fact that we act in concert does not mean that we agree about our goals. Indeed, Arendt’s conception of freedom accommodates, and even requires, quite a bit of conflict.¹² Whether in agreement or conflict, our collective engagement in politics generates power.

If I believe that plurality is a condition of freedom, why not follow Habermas and use a definition of communicative freedom derived from linguistic intersubjectivity?¹³ To be clear, I do not want to deny the many important aspects of freedom that are not about land. And as I explore below, I believe that freedom with regard to land is always also communicative. However, the excesses of the linguistic turn have drawn our attention away from the material conditions of democracy.¹⁴ Language is surely fundamental, but so is the fact that we are beings who are born into places, and whose experience of the world and of freedom is structured by the

¹¹ Sharon Krause, *Freedom Beyond Sovereignty: Reconstructing Liberal Individualism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

¹² On the importance of dissensus, see Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

¹³ CITE Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*

¹⁴ In this context, Honig’s *Public Things* is a crucial exception.

geographies in which we are embedded and which we are constantly remaking.¹⁵ Jeff Malpas, who argues that place is a condition of possibility of our cognition, writes,

Our identities are bound up with particular places or localities through the very structuring of subjectivity ... Particular places enter into our self-conception and self-identity inasmuch as it is only in, and through our grasp of, the places in which we are situated that we can encounter objects, other persons or, indeed, ourselves.¹⁶

We are “bound up with place” even when we resist it, transform it, and escape it.

Communicative freedom, insofar as it is bound up with place is also bound up with world-building.

To understand freedom, then, we must investigate world-building. To begin, I will stipulate the criteria according to which world-building is democratic. World-building is the collective process through which we shape our physical world. It is a distinctly political process, and it involves both labor/work and action. For this process to correspond to freedom rather than domination, it must satisfy the following criteria:

1. To correspond to freedom, the process of world-building must be open to the participation and contestation of all inhabitants. World-building is neither sovereign nor characterized by mastery. This criterion corresponds to *plurality*.
2. The shape of the world that is the outcome of world-building must not prevent the people who live in it from engaging in, and making a difference in, politics. This criterion corresponds to *natality*.
3. World-building should not *use up* the earth. The vibrancy and limits of the earth must be respected in order for democratic world-building to be sustainable over time.

To elaborate and justify these criteria, I put the process of world-building and its attendant activities under the microscope. I turn first to Hannah Arendt’s struggle to relate and separate

¹⁵ Henri Lefebvre was at pains to make this point against the excesses of the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure. In general, critical geographers begin from the presumption that spatiality structures our experience of the world and our freedom. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1992).

¹⁶ Jeff Malpas, *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 177.

labor, work, and action, and find her provocative but unsatisfactory. I then turn to G.W.F. Hegel and Jürgen Habermas, who help me better articulate the power-laden relationship between work and action. After integrating some of these insights into democratic theory, I find that there remains a troubling residue of sovereign mastery that undermines the sustainability of world-building. I find that Martin Heidegger, new materialism, and indigenous theorists of “grounded normativity” can provide healthy correctives to the mastery impulse.

Arendt and the Puzzling Relationship between Work and Action

In her 1963 lectures “Introduction Into Politics,” Hannah Arendt makes a very Hegelian claim. She writes,

Relationships established by action, in which the past lives on in the form of a history that goes on speaking and being spoken about...can exist only within the world produced by man, nesting there in its stones until they too speak and in speaking bear witness, even if we must first dig them out of the earth.¹⁷

Here, Arendt rouses an image of human relationships nestled in an intelligible world, a world that has been “dug out of the earth” and humanized. This image calls to mind the Hegelian twin processes of externalization (*Entäußerung*) and remembrance (*Erinnerung*), through which Spirit finds its way home into a second nature that has been both transformed by human labor as well as made meaningful, re-appropriated, and valorized through history.¹⁸ Though they disagree on much, Arendt and Hegel seem to converge on the image of humans as laboring civilizers, creatures who simultaneously dig their world out of the earth and, through their actions, bestow it with meaning.¹⁹ Humans are world-builders.

¹⁷ Hannah Arendt, *Introduction into Politics*, ed. Jerome Kohn, vol. The Promise of Politics (New York: Schocken, 2005), 161.

¹⁸ Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 52-53.

¹⁹ Arendt’s explicit opinion of Hegel tends to be a caricature of the *Philosophy of History*, in which Spirit looks back at the inevitable march towards freedom from its pinnacle. See e.g. Hannah Arendt, *Lecture's on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 57.

To understand the phenomenology of world-building, we have to break it into its components, which for Arendt are work and action. These two activities emerge from Arendt's threefold phenomenological distinction of the human activities that comprise the *vita activa*: labor, work, and action.²⁰ Labor is oriented to biological needs and encompasses the cyclical elements of human life. For Arendt, the products of labor are distinguished by the fact that they do not last (e.g. food). The products of labor sustain us, but lack durability and cannot, therefore, provide us with the permanence we need. For that, we must turn to work, "the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence."²¹ Work, which corresponds to both Greek terms *poiesis* and *techne*, is an activity of creation, of molding the givenness of nature into an intelligible artifice. Its products are durable (e.g. infrastructure). The man-made world is the home in which we live, which orients us, and against which we exert our political efforts. Action, on the other hand, encompasses the activities of speech and deed, which are spun into a web of narratives as meaning is drawn from human affairs. Action is radically contingent and has a boundless quality, and thus finds a corrective in the solidity, the "friction of finitude", that work provides.²²

In the opening chapter of *The Human Condition*, Arendt presents action as strictly independent from work. She writes, "Action [is] the only activity that goes on *directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter...*"²³ Thus work, which corresponds to world-building activities, and whose primary human condition is worldliness itself, finds itself

²⁰ My description of the three terms draws from Honig.

²¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 7.

²² Honig, *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair*, 38. *Nomos*, as a concrete form of law, also reigns in the boundlessness of action. See Chapter Three, "Two Models of Territory: Hannah Arendt and Carl Schmitt on the *Nomos* of the Earth."

²³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 7. Emphasis mine.

immediately divorced from speech and deed.²⁴ Work, for Arendt, is not communicative. Later, Arendt contradicts her earlier statement of separation and presents work and action as mutually dependent. In defining the public realm, Arendt tells us that the “public... is related to the human artifact, the fabrication of human hands, *as well as to affairs* which go on among those who inhabit the man-made world together.”²⁵ The world is thus a product of both work and action. Importantly, the objects of work stabilize action: “The things of the world have the function of stabilizing human life, and their objectivity lies in the fact that...men, their ever-changing nature notwithstanding, can retrieve their sameness, that is, their identity, by being related to the same chair and the same table.”²⁶ The world of intelligible objects anchors human action in a persistent reality, without which we would become disoriented. In this context, Honig reads Arendt as an object relations theorist: the products of work provide a “Winnicottian holding environment,” which stabilizes the chaos of our lives by providing durable sites of shared orientation.²⁷ Arendt’s oft-cited example of this logic comes in the image of a table as a shared interest that lies in between us (*inter-est*).²⁸ The table gathers us as equals, at eye level, making it possible for us to carry on our business.

²⁴ Honig, *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair*, 54.

²⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 52. Emphasis mine.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 137.

²⁷ Honig, *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair*, 42-46. Roy Tsao also argues that durability is central for Arendt in relating work and action. See Roy Tsao, "Arendt against Athens: Rereading the Human Condition," *Political Theory* 30 (2002).

²⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 52; Honig, *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair*, 52.



Bartholomeus van der Helst, *The Governors of the Kloveniersdoelen* (1655), Amsterdam Museum

Action needs the products of work, it needs the table, but so too the table needs the actions of those around it to maintain it and give it a meaningful place in the world. Arendt writes, “Without being talked about by men and without housing them, the world would not be a human artifice but a heap of unrelated things to which each isolated individual was at liberty to add one more object.”²⁹

For Arendt, the artifice of the world not only lends durability, it also structures the space of appearance.³⁰ In this second sense, the world is the material anchor of judgment: it is a source of persistence, a thing around which we can gather in order to triangulate our perspectives (*doxa*) and keep our grip on reality. The idea that the persistence (*Beharrlichkeit*) of objects is an important component of judgment goes back to Kant’s Refutation of Idealism in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, a work Arendt knew well. There Kant argues that the persistence of objects enables the “I” that accompanies all of my representations to be unified over time, thus anchoring consciousness in a material reality beyond the mind.³¹

²⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 204.

³⁰ Patchen Markell, "Arendt's Work: On the Architecture of *the Human Condition*," *College Literature* 38, no. 1 (2011): 42.

³¹ CITE Kant, Refutation of Idealism, *Critique of Pure Reason*

The persistence of objects as an anchor of judgment is more than an abstract philosophical issue, it has political implications. Without shared objects to give us a sense of shared reality, we are thrown back on ourselves, or onto the hazy realms of shared identity and shared partisanship, which can disorient us as much as they gather us together.³² Shared identity has the capacity to destroy the worldly in-between that makes us an individual with our own story and perspective to bestow on the world. Arendt herself understood that the destruction of the public realm under Nazism was as much a destruction of the space of appearances as it was an assault on action. The former paved the way for the latter.³³ The Nazis purposefully drained the public of its potential to gather people together; isolation was a tool of domination because a collective without a shared sense of reality is a public with no capacity to act. Shared identity without shared reality is one of the great dangers to human freedom, a hard-won truth that we must relearn today.

Arendt thus contradicts her first definition of action as “the activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter” and hints at a mutually dependent relationship between action and work: *action needs a durable world to house and orient it, and the products of work must house a world of action in order to persist.*

This is as far as Arendt can get us with the relationship between work and action. Her phenomenology of world-building is limited by her fear of the intrusion of labor and work into the public sphere. Her fears about the place of work in politics come in part from her rejection of Heidegger’s emphasis on *poiesis* as the primary mode of world disclosure. *Poiesis*, the activity of

³² Honig, *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair*, 16.

³³ Lisa Wedeen’s study of authoritarian structuring of public space in Syria attests to the fact that the physical layout of public space and rituals that people are forced to engage in leads to domination as much as the shutting down of communicative action. Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

material creation, made its way into his political theory, where he envisioned the statesman in the paradigm of the artist, a great molder of the people and state.³⁴ Heidegger, who for a while was in search of authentic politics, had no intersubjective concepts (e.g. “action”) in which to ground a theory, and so instead turned to “muddled concepts like ‘folk’ and ‘earth’ in an effort to supply his isolated Selves with a shared, common ground to stand on.”³⁵ Ultimately, Arendt rejects Heidegger’s model of politics in favor of a model that emphasizes non-sovereign action as world-disclosing.

Arendt’s rejection of Heidegger leads her to view work as inherently violent. She writes, “violation and violence is present in all fabrication, and *homo faber*, the creator of the human artifice, has always been a destroyer of nature.”³⁶ For Arendt, reacting to the “calamities of action”³⁷ with the force of work, wherein the statesman tries to “remain master of his doings from beginning to end,”³⁸ is tyrannical. Totalitarianism reflects this will to control, make predictable, and dominate. Because of its purported relationship to mastery, Arendt has, at times, the impulse to exclude work from politics entirely. Her deep-seated fear of politics as mastery informs Arendt’s development as a committed theorist of non-sovereignty. This theme spans her works from the very beginning of her career through mature works like *On Revolution* (1963).³⁹

³⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlins Hymnen ‘Germanien’ Und ‘Der Rhein’ [1934-35]*, vol. 39, Gesamtausgabe (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1980), 51; Karsten Harries, “Heidegger as a Political Thinker,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 29, no. 4 (1976).

³⁵ Hannah Arendt, “What Is Existential Philosophy?,” in *Essays in Understanding: 1930-1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 1994), 182-83.

³⁶ *The Human Condition*, 139.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 220.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Anna Jurkevics, “Hannah Arendt Encounters Friedrich Von Gentz: On Revolution, Preservation, and European Unity,” *Modern Intellectual History* (2021). Onlinefirst at <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/modern-intellectual-history/article/abs/hannah-arendt-encounters-friedrich-von-gentz-on-revolution-preservation-and-european-unity/7194BA3533B926C5B7DF9BFE917E2A0A>.

Arendt similarly rejects the intrusion of labor into politics. Her fear of the encroachment of “the social” was motivated by her rejection of Marx, who had conflated labor and politics. Whatever Marx’s political shortcomings, Arendt overcorrects, and therefore misses how labor and modes of production shape the world and thereby condition and constrain future action.⁴⁰

Sean Sayers writes,

Labor does not simply vanish in consumption: it creates something beyond the satisfaction of material need and the reproduction of “life.” In its human form at least, it always takes place in a context of social relations; and it produces and reproduces those relations. ...The human and social world always and necessarily arises out of and exists on the basis of productive activity to meet material needs.⁴¹

Sayers’s makes a compelling argument against separating labor and work based on the permanence of their products – regardless of the relative perishability of their products, both activities produce the material structure of social relations, and in this sense, they have a similar permanence. Arendt, though she embraces the material artifice, thus overlooks the insight that the physical layout of the world is determined by economic modes of production, an insight that has been drawn out by critical geographers.⁴² Modes of production can change the physical shape of the world in such a way that free politics and the disclosure of reality that Arendt held so dear are no longer possible, in which case the only way to reconstitute freedom is to change the shape of the world by overhauling the mode of production.

Land grabs are an example of how modes of production can change the shape of the world in a way that makes democratic politics impossible. Based on Arendt’s conception of labor, there is no great difference between locally-governed subsistence agriculture and large-

⁴⁰ On modes of production and geography, see Doreen Massey, *Spatial Divisions of Labor: Social Structures and the Geography of Production*, vol. 1995 (London: Routledge, 1995).

⁴¹ Sean Sayers, "Creative Activity and Alienation in Hegel and Marx," *Historical Materialism* 11, no. 1 (2003): 116-17.

⁴² CITE

scale mono-cropping run by transnational agribusiness conglomerates. In reality, of course, the difference is everything. The worldly-in between stabilized by shared grazing lands, locally configured systems of tenancy, shared water, etc. is destroyed by changing the mode of production to large-scale agribusiness. Both modes provide permanence, but one sustains local democracy while the other destroys it.

Ultimately, Arendt is more provocative than conclusive in drawing relationships among the human activities. She fails to politicize labor and work adequately, fails to convince us that labor and work are distinct, and fails to explain how these activities could be more or less democratic. Her discussion of worldly objects tends to treat them as neutral (a table), when of course, objects are anything but neutral. Public things, Honig tells us, are not innocent.⁴³ Still, Arendt provides us some important insights:

- 1. World-building is an activity constituted by the (as yet unresolved) relationship among labor, work, and action.*
- 2. The practice of freedom brings the new and unprecedented into the world. Action, in its radical indeterminacy, cannot survive the encounter with sovereignty.*
- 3. World-building, understood as work or labor, creates the material conditions of freedom.*

Hegel and Habermas: the Mutual Constitution of Labor and Interaction

Hegel can provide us with clarity on the power-laden nature of work and labor, and how they are inextricably entangled with action. As I move to Hegel, my terminology shifts. While Arendt strictly differentiates between labor (*Arbeit*) and work (*Herstellen*), Hegel does not. Both concepts fall under the category of *Arbeit* for Hegel, and so when I speak of him I will refer to “labor,” even though I am considering a parallel phenomenon to both Arendtian categories of labor and work.

⁴³ CITE

I consider two texts by Hegel: the master-slave dialectic in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) and the earlier *Jenenser Realphilosophie* (1802-6). Both look carefully at the role that labor and objects play in politics. My reading of Hegel rejects the traditional Marxist readings of Kojève and Lukács in favor of Habermas's interpretation in the 1973 essay "Labor and Interaction: Remarks on Hegel's Philosophy of Mind."⁴⁴ Like the Marxists, I am interested in drawing out a theory of social labor from Hegel's dialectic. However, Kojève's philosophical elisions in particular—his conflation of self-Consciousness and class-consciousness, and of externalization (*Entäußerung*) and alienation (*Entfremdung*)—would confuse my attempt to grasp the fundamental relationship of labor and action. Habermas is more helpful on this account, but his aim, which is to reject the instrumentality of labor for the communicative freedom of action ("interaction"), is not my own. My aim is to show that labor itself *is* communicative, and therefore can be more or less free, and therefore that world-building, as a form of communicative social labor, can be more or less free.

For Hegel, labor is not just the work of our hands. Labor is also part of Spirit's journey of making a second nature and home. The process of externalization (*Entäußerung*), in which the "subject externalizes him/herself by transforming what is given to it in such a way as to humanize it,"⁴⁵ is a driving concept of historical development for Hegel. In this process, nature becomes a spiritualized object, an object that "conveys human meanings and significations."⁴⁶ Moreover, the moment of negativity, which prompts dialectical transformation, is described by Hegel as laborious: "... the seriousness, the suffering, the patience, and the labor of the

⁴⁴ Jürgen Habermas, "Labor and Interaction: Remarks on Hegel's Jena *Philosophy of Mind*," in *Theory and Practice* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973). For a critique of the Marxist interpretation see Steven Smith, "Hegel on Slavery and Domination," *The Review of Metaphysics* 46, no. 1 (1992): 104-05.

⁴⁵ Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*, 48.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

negative.”⁴⁷ Hegel also describes knowledge “working its passage,” Spirit “toiling” and taking on the “enormous labor of world-history,” and the Concept “laboring.”⁴⁸ Labor is central to the Hegelian stance of the subject towards nature. We labor and Spirit labors in the dialectical historical journey towards freedom. This is the journey of civilization.

But what about the actual labor of our hands? For Hegel, our laboring relationship to nature is informed in the first instance by desire, which is the immediate relationship of Consciousness to its natural surroundings. When we are faced with the otherness of our natural environment, our first instinct is to consume it or destroy it. Desire prompts us to negate the object in rash ways. We are hungry, we are not sure what all this stuff around us is, and we want to be sure that we our existence is independent of our surroundings. Eventually, we develop a more sophisticated relationship to the otherness that surrounds us, and labor is the key to this transformation. By laboring, Consciousness does not annihilate the otherness it faces, but preserves that otherness and works on it to make it his own. Through labor, “the object is preserved, worked upon, formed and transformed.”⁴⁹ By laboring, Consciousness is able to separate itself from nature, transform nature, and make it a meaningful object for itself.

Labor is the key to the *Phenomenology’s* master-slave dialectic. In this encounter, Consciousness meets another consciousness, struggles with it, and emerges as fully *self-Conscious*. The two Consciousness establish recognition, thus becoming fully human through their encounter with each other. Upon first meeting, however, each seeks to destroy the other by engaging in a battle to the death, because Consciousness “must rid itself of its self-externality” in order to ascertain certainty of itself.⁵⁰ The desire, a desire to be sure of oneself, that drives the

⁴⁷ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 10.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 5, 16, 43.

⁴⁹ Sayers, "Creative Activity and Alienation in Hegel and Marx," 110.

⁵⁰ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 114.

first moment leads to absolute negation. Next, one consciousness submits at the prospect of its own annihilation and becomes the slave. The master “is the consciousness that exists for itself,” while the slave becomes a thing that exists for the master.⁵¹ The medium that binds the slave to the master is a shackle, the “chain from which he could not break free in the struggle.”⁵² Crucially, in the first instance the two consciousnesses are related by the materiality of a thing. The chain is Consciousness’s first political geography. Thus for Hegel, the journey towards *self-Consciousness* is, from the start, constituted by material relationships.

The slave is related to the master through the chain, and he is also related to the master through his labor, which brings other things into the relationship—the slave works the fields for the master, and he uses tools to do so. Initially, the master demands recognition without giving it in return, but he finds this inadequate. The slave, as a mere tool, cannot reflect humanity back to the master. At the same time, the slave labors and transforms the world around him. Using his tools and his labor, he turns the barren field into a crop.

The chain, the tool, and the crop all mediate the relationship between master and slave. The first is the slave’s bondage, an artifact of domination because “the lord is the power over this thing.”⁵³ While the lord relates mediately to the slave through the chain, he also relates himself mediately to the crop—his sustenance—through the slave. The master enjoys and consumes the fruits of the slave’s labor. But the slave has something the master lacks, and that is the experience of independence that he gains through labor. While the chain is his bondage, the crop becomes an expression of the slave’s power. He gets rid of his “attachment to natural

⁵¹ Ibid., 115.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

existence...by working on [the land].⁵⁴ Unlike the dependence of the chain, the slave finds his power and essential independence reflected back to him in the products of his labor.

Herbert Marcuse explains, “The objects of his labor are no longer dead things that shackle him to other men, but products of his work, and, as such, part and parcel of his own being.”⁵⁵ Work transforms the slave; it arrests his desire, staves off fleetingness, and reveals his power to him by reflecting his world-transforming capacity in an independent product; the product is an image of his mind, his reason, his *mastery*. His transformed surroundings become familiar because he molded them himself, and he becomes less afraid. He throws off his chains. Unlike before, the new man, transformed through labor just as he has transformed the natural world, is capable of mutual recognition with his master.



Joseph Wright of Derby, *A Blacksmith's Shop* (1771), Yale Center for British Art

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁵⁵ Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*, Second Edition, 116-17.

In the struggle for recognition, material things actively structure the power differential between master and slave. Things are not neutral; they carry a valence. To repeat Honig: “public things...are not innocent or pure. They are political.”⁵⁶ For this reason, I find Arendt’s example of the table to be unsatisfactory. By choosing a table, an object that is meant to gather us as equals, Arendt smuggles democratic assumptions into her definition of work. But the objects of work need not be conducive to democracy, and often, they are not. From the beginning, the objects between us change who we are, determining and constricting our freedoms in ways that may be invisible to us. A chain is an obvious tool of domination, but masters are smart and will “spread garlands of flowers over the iron chains which weigh men down.”⁵⁷ We cannot always see the chain. For example, many cities have taken public benches out of central locations, or engineered benches so that they cannot be laid down upon, in order to expel the homeless.⁵⁸



Photo courtesy of Interboro via *The Gothamist*

<https://gothamist.com/news/a-field-guide-to-the-weapons-of-hostile-architecture-in-nyc>

⁵⁶ Honig, *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair*, 36.

⁵⁷ CITE ROUSSEAU FIRST DISCOURSE

⁵⁸ A guide to “hostile architecture” in New York city: <https://gothamist.com/news/a-field-guide-to-the-weapons-of-hostile-architecture-in-nyc>

This silent form of exclusion and cruelty goes unnoticed by most citizens, but it changes our world: it banishes the homeless so that they no longer appear to us; it preemptively removes them from our concern. The problem is that to mobilize against such forms of domination, we have to be able to see them.

It is interesting that Hegel is drawn first to the chain, which has such a clear valence of domination. For him, our initial material relations are characterized by domination, and only by transforming nature can we learn independence and overcome slavery. It is true that in some sense, freedom or domination does not inhere in the thing itself—a chain can be used for other purposes and a table arrangement can encourage inequality—but it is also the case that meaning is engineered into things and then drawn back out of them through usage. Hand-cuffs, for example, can be used for many purposes, but they were engineered to fetter humans, and because of this they are intelligible as a tool for fettering. That said, the artifice of the world can be re-appropriated. The things that structure our experience of freedom comprise an ever-transforming and transformable terrain of power relations, of potential freedom and subversions. The capacity for transformation lies in the activity of labor itself. Labor takes a central position in the master-slave dialectic not only because Hegel believes that material relations structure recognition, but because there is real emancipatory power in labor. We have the capacity to transform the world around us and make it our own. We can take the field back for ourselves.

Take, for example, the conflict over avocado farming in Mexico.⁵⁹ As global demand for avocado rises, cartels have gotten their hands into the avocado business, and have been dominating local avocado farmers, forcing them to pay taxes on their profits and murdering the

⁵⁹ This example was brought to my attention by Paulina Ochoa-Espejo. See also {Espejo, On Borders: Territories, Legitimacy}, and the Rights of Place #550}

noncompliant.⁶⁰ Beginning in 2013, the farmers of Tancitaro in Western Michoacan took a stand. They have taken up arms and formed a local self-defense group to guard their crops and stop cartels from interfering with their livelihoods.⁶¹ They have taken the fields back for themselves. This is a case of world-building in its emancipatory mode.

The *Phenomenology* thus gives a powerful account of the political valence of things and the emancipatory potential of labor, but it is quite abstract. Hegel's earlier *Realphilosophie* (Jena Lectures) is more concrete. In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel makes the insight, over and against Kant, that the identity of self-consciousness, the "I" that accompanies all of my representations, emerges from a process of mediations, the most important of which is the encounter with another consciousness. In the earlier *Realphilosophie*, however, we find that in order to become an "I," Consciousness has to engage in the concrete activities of language-creation, labor, marriage and reproduction, and property possession. The dialectical progression of these activities presents us with a clear relationship among communication, labor, and political institutions.

In the *Realphilosophie*, Consciousness's development begins with language. Through the activities of memory and naming Consciousness starts to differentiate itself from nature. By remembering and naming objects, nature becomes an object for Consciousness, but only in a theoretical sense. Consciousness's dissatisfaction the indeterminacy of language prompts it to "venture outside of itself and... [labor] with the object."⁶² The key idea here is that when

⁶⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/dec/30/are-mexican-avocados-the-worlds-new-conflict-commodity>

⁶¹ <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2018/02/02/582086654/mexicos-avocado-capital-says-it-s-kicked-cartels-off-the-farm>

⁶² Pini Ifergan, *Hegel's Discovery of the Philosophy of Spirit: Automy, Alienation, and Ethical Life*, trans. Nessa Olshansky-Ashtar (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 140. Much more could be said about Hegel's theory of language, which is inadequately intersubjective at this point in the dialectic, but I will leave this aside.

Consciousness begins to labor, it has already started engaging the object with language. *Labor is communicative.*

Laboring consciousness's divide from nature becomes permanent in the form of the tool.

In a key passage, Hegel writes,

The *tool* is the existing rational middle, the existing universality, of the practical process; it appears on the side of the active against the passive; it is itself passive on the side of the laborer, and active against what is worked on. It is that wherein laboring has its permanence, that which alone remains over from the laboring and the product of work, that wherein their contingency is [immortalized]; it is propagated in traditions, whereas both the subject and the object of desire subsist only as individuals, and pass away.⁶³

A number of insights can be drawn from this passage. First of all, the tool draws Consciousness out of itself in a meaningful engagement with a persistent, material world. Furthermore, the tool is a “concrete universal,” it is an actualization of human reason. Finally, the tool becomes permanent, along with the products of labor, because it is “is propagated in traditions.” Pini Ifergan writes, “The tool is the first concrete manifestation of tradition, of heritage, of the transmission of culture from one generation to the next.”⁶⁴ In this sense, “the middle”—by which Hegel means any medium through which Spirit externalizes itself—is conceptually close to Arendt’s concept of world. It is comprised of physical objects of labor, which are material, as well as language. Importantly, Hegel’s conception of *labor is always already communicative*. If labor is always communicative, if language and labor cannot be disentangled, then Arendt’s separation of action as the lone realm of “speech and deed” becomes less plausible.

In the final mediation of the dialectic, Consciousness’s desire is directed towards another consciousness, which culminates in love. Love is actualized in marriage and the middle of the child. The family is the first moral relation. It is also a context of possession in the form of

⁶³ G.W.F. Hegel, *System of Ethical Life (1802/1803) and First Philosophy of Spirit*, trans. H.S. Harris and T.M. Knox, vol. SUNY Press (Albany 1979), 230-31.

⁶⁴ Ifergan, *Hegel’s Discovery of the Philosophy of Spirit: Automy, Alienation, and Ethical Life*, 141.

family property (*Familiengut*), which means that the family is a social relationship that incorporates labor and its products. At one point Hegel writes, “not only my possession [*Habe*] or my property is posited here, but my person, because in my existence lies my all [*mein Ganzes*]: my honor and my life.”⁶⁵ My possessions are part of my “all” along with my honor and my life. While I agree with Hegel that social relationships must always incorporate labor and its products, I am no longer with him when he poses this incorporation in terms of possession. Why must we *possess* what we have transformed? What does individual possession give us, exactly, and why do we need it for freedom? I will come back to this question below. For now, we need to know that Hegel finds possession important enough that it requires legal protection, prompting an infrastructure of rights. The inviolability of property, which carries within it Consciousness’s original liberation from nature, is thus sublated into recognition between persons via contracts.

Habermas recognizes an important aspect of Hegel’s argument here: regardless of what we think about possession *per se*, the point is that labor is always *social* labor. Labor is socially produced, and socially consolidated, and this is because labor and interaction are mutually constitutive. Habermas writes, “instrumental action [labor] and interaction [recognition] are linked in the recognized production of labor.”⁶⁶ While in the *Phenomenology* labor is envisioned as the solitary emancipation of Consciousness from the undifferentiated manifold of nature, labor comes into vision in the *Realphilosophie* as a complex social and political exchange of needs, a system which requires governance via political institutions. We might disagree with how Hegel

⁶⁵ G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel and the Human Spirit: Jena Lectures and Philosophy of Spirit* (1805-1806), trans. Leo Rauch, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983), 128; quoted by Habermas, "Labor and Interaction: Remarks on Hegel's Jena *Philosophy of Mind*," 159.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

wanted our labors to be governed, i.e. through private property, but I think he is fundamentally correct about the dialectical interdependence of communication, social labor, and politics.

Importantly, social labor retains the “cunning” of solitary Consciousness’s creative capacity. This cunning lies in our capacity to transform our surroundings, including the political geographies in which we find ourselves to be more or less free, and more or less at home. Labor thus contains an *emancipatory* dimension. Interaction reflects and incorporates the freedom that was established through labor. As an outgrowth of social labor, interaction sublates labor’s creative cunning and gains the capacity to transform nature into a human world. The cunning of labor is work’s answer to action’s intrinsic capacity for natality.

Habermas acknowledges Hegel’s contribution of identifying how our freedom relies on the mutually constitutive relationship between labor and interaction. He writes, “the self-formative process of spirit as well as of our species essentially depends on that relation between labor and interaction.”⁶⁷ Recognition, which finds its instantiation in legal rights, grows out of the need to regulate the modes and products of social labor. Moreover, labor as social labor is “embedded within a network of interactions, and is therefore dependent on the communicative boundary conditions that underlie every possible cooperation.”⁶⁸ From Hegel, we learn that the embeddedness runs the other way too: the products of labor are “propagated in traditions,” which is to say that social labor produces the worldly artifice in which interaction is itself embedded.

In the end, however, Habermas pulls back from the emancipatory possibilities of combining labor and interaction presented by Hegel. For him, social labor remains merely instrumental. He writes, “Into the conditional imperatives which instrumental action follows, enters in solely the causality of nature and not the causality of destiny. A reduction of interaction

⁶⁷ Habermas, “Labor and Interaction: Remarks on Hegel’s *Jena Philosophy of Mind*,” 169.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 158.

to labor or derivation of labor from interaction is not possible.”⁶⁹As we saw above, Arendt expresses a similar aversion to the intrusion of labor and work into politics. Both she and Habermas accuse Marx of collapsing the important distinction between action, which is communicative, and work/labor, which is instrumental. Habermas’s ultimate aim is to revive the communicative dimension of Hegel’s dialectic. But if we are less worried about the intrusion of labor into politics, then we can draw more radical lessons from Hegel here. Labor is social. Insofar as labor transforms a world shared with others, it is an inherently political activity. And because labor is also always communicative, it is subject to negotiation and justification and can become emancipatory.

As we learned from the master-slave dialectic, things can either enable or inhibit recognition. To relate this in the language of the *Realphilosophie*, if recognition grows out of the regulation of social labor, then social labor and its products have to be so configured as to enable recognition. Political geography is one of the products of social labor. The relationship between labor and interaction determines how places are created, and the shape of a place—just like the chain—determines how freely people can engage in further social labor and interaction. We can now identify a distinct relationship between labor and interaction, and at this point I will return to the language of work and action: *Work and action are mutually constitutive. The communicative nature of action also characterizes work, and the emancipatory cunning of labor is carried over into action’s capacity for new beginnings.* Therefore, work, and not just action, plays a key role in the creation of the hermeneutic horizon into which human deeds, actions, and recognition are inserted. Arendt’s calls the “web of narratives” must be regarded as both material and communicative.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 159.

In sum, the following lessons can be drawn from Hegel:

1. *Work and action, or labor and interaction, are mutually constitutive. Labor is communicative.*
2. *The creative “cunning” of laboring Consciousness harbors the human capacity to transform nature into a worldly home of familiar objects, and to remake this home towards the end of freedom.*
3. *Politics, as the outgrowth and regulation of social labor, takes on the shape of the world established through social labor. Social and political relationships are structured by things, modes of production, and political geography.*
4. *The struggle for recognition can bring material structures into question, just as chains can be thrown off, fields reclaimed, and city squares occupied.*

Regarding the last point, emancipatory politics—call it action, interaction, or the struggle for recognition—can push back against the shape of the world, re-making it according to new goals. It is exactly such political interference in the materiality of the world that constitutes “world-building,” which combines work and action such that places are made, re-made, contested, and negotiated. World-building is politics in its laborious mode. It is not always democratic or carried out towards the end of freedom, but it always has the capacity to be/do so. In the process of world-building, work is implicated in the same unpredictable sociality that conditions action. In this conception, work partially sheds the disposition of mastery and sovereignty imputed to it by Arendt and comes to share action’s radical indeterminacy.

Democratic World-Building

World-building, as I have posed it, has emancipatory potential. What conditions must be met to realize that potential? Here I’ve taken the definition of freedom I laid out above and elaborated its criteria. In order to be democratic and correspond with freedom, world-building must meet these criteria:

1. *To be democratic, world-building must be open to participation and contestation from all inhabitants of the relevant place (corresponds to plurality).*

2. *The shape of the world (the product of world-building) must not prevent the people who live in it from engaging in, and making a difference in, politics (corresponds to natality).*
3. *Democratic world-building can only be sustained over time if humans respond to the limits and vibrancy of land and materials they use to build a world; forms of world-building that use up the earth will undermine themselves over the long run.*

According to these principles, most human world-building is anti-democratic. Often, people have no opportunity to engage in the activities that shape their world. They and their labor are used as tools for the gain of others, and they have no choice but to live in environments that structurally benefit the powerful while disadvantaging themselves. In such cases, emancipatory acts of world-building should aim to disrupt the communicative and material structures that hold domination in place. Democratic world-building resists the apparent immutability of place.

This is an admittedly tall order, and so emancipatory moments of world-building often emerge in the form of resistance. The 2016 protest by the Standing Rock Sioux and their allies against the Dakota Access Pipeline project is an example of world-building as resistance.⁷⁰ The Standing Rock Sioux are not actively constructing anything, and in fact are trying to block an instance of world-building as domination by obstructing the pipeline.⁷¹ The decision *not to build* can be as much an act of world-building as construction. Their resistance is a form of world-building because it is a reclamation of a place, and uses place-based strategies: protesters have occupied the land and carried out ceremonies that both enact and draw attention to the activities that will be made impossible by the pipeline. These place-based activities are entangled in discursive ones: protestors have engaged in justification in the public sphere, and have gone to the courts to question US sovereignty. To question US sovereignty, the Standing Rock Sioux

⁷⁰ See also Honig on Wet'suwet'en pipeline resistance in British Columbia. Honig, *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair*, 22-24.

⁷¹ While the pipeline was completed in 2017, I use the present tense because the Standing Rock Sioux are still engaged in litigation against the government-backed developers.

have invoked the 1851 Fort Laramie Treaty, which grants Sioux sovereignty and is no longer recognized by the US. Their invocation of the treaty dredges up the memory of stolen land and betrayed promises.⁷² These claims have been powerful in gathering solidarities around their cause. The invocation of the lapsed Fort Laramie treaty engages in world-building at its best: the Sioux have framed the controversy so that the question *what is this place?*—is this the United States, Sioux land, a sacred site, a water source—emerges from the question *what activities should happen here?* The dormant Fort Laramie treaty rose to the surface when the everyday use of the land was threatened. Moreover, the remembrance of this treaty, which provides evidence of settler recognition of Sioux lands, shoves the debate onto the rocky terrain of history, where the actions of the government and developers are put in context of a longer historical tradition in which settlers have stolen, dissembled, squatted, and retroactively legitimized the colonial seizure of North America.⁷³

How does the resistance at Standing Rock measure up to the three criteria of democratic world-building? By occupying the sacred site and demanding a reckoning, the protesters demanded that the decision to construct the pipeline must be open to their participation and contestation. The protesters also emphasized the costs of the pipeline to the shape of their land as holding environment for democracy. The site, they have argued, is sacred and a source of water. This particular plot of land sustains the people in their communal life and to build a pipeline through it would close it to democratic life. The Standing Rock Sioux were right that the construction of a pipeline would oust democratic activities from the land. When the pipeline was constructed in 2017, the resistance was forced to retreat into the courts where it remains to this

⁷² <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-pipeline-dakotaaccess-idUSKCN12O2FN>

⁷³ On retroactive legitimation of land claims as a mode of colonization, see Robert Nichols, "Theft Is Property! The Recursive Logic of Dispossession," *Political Theory* 46, no. 1 (2018).

day. Finally, because the Sioux have framed their resistance in terms of access to water—they have used the slogan *Water is life!*—they have proven to be acutely aware of the natural limits and conditions of communal life. Water sustains the people, and without it, we cannot even get started with democracy or anything else.⁷⁴

What about land grabbing? What would be required for inhabitants of grabbed land to participate world-building? As is evidenced by popular support for land grabs in states like Indonesia, voting in national elections will not help affected inhabitants establish participation in land policy because the majority has stripped them of this power in the name of national interest. In cases like these, traditional democratic procedures will not enable access to world-building. If we rely on majoritarian voting and discourses in the public sphere, then all that will remain is “the shell of democracy.”⁷⁵ Democratic world-building, on the other hand, would require a great deal in cases of large-scale land transfers. First, land sales would have to be put up for debate with the fair inclusion of all inhabitants. Inhabitants would also have to be granted participation in the activities of zoning, building infrastructure, regulating common land and usage rights, ensuring tenancy rights, and managing the environment. Furthermore, large-scale mono-cropping and extraction, which often require the demolition of public space and residences, are democratically unacceptable. These activities destroy ecosystems and use up the earth with no view towards the sustainability of the democratic community over time. In short, land grabbing cannot actually be made compatible with democracy.

The case of land grabbing alerts us to the fact that world-building activities must be incorporated into our understanding of democracy if it is to live up to the ideal that all

⁷⁴ For a territorial theories which center water as a basis for cooperation among and within democratic peoples, see Paulina Ochoa Espejo, (New York: Oxford University Press, *On Borders: Territories, Legitimacy, and the Rights of Place*). CITE NINE

⁷⁵ See Honig, 13. On the problem of reducing democracy to majoritarian procedures, see Honig 4-5.

inhabitants have the right to participate in rule. To see the shortcomings of democracy when world-building is not taken into account, take the case of the indigenous Saami people. The Saami have had to wage fierce political battles, especially with Norway, to retain their way of life (primarily reindeer herding) on their ancestral lands. It is an important case because theirs is a battle for self-rule over land in one of the strongest democracies in the world. The northern Saami people were existentially threatened by the burgeoning Norwegian democracy in the early 1900s when measures designed by the majority stripped them of their land and forced their assimilation. It has required vast political effort beginning in the 1970s and continuing today to re-establish Saami rights to land practices, including jurisdictional rights as a recognized minority, and to protect the Saami approach to the land. For the Saami, control over land use is a precondition of democracy. Their self-rule requires the ability to carry out herding and subsistence practices, and they have had to establish these over and against the Norwegian popular sovereign. Effective democracy for the Saami people requires access to world-building, which in turn requires the dispersal and fracture of popular sovereignty away from the Norwegian majority.

To govern land democratically, truly democratically, communities face incredible uphill battles. When the powerful successfully capture the land, they often shape it in ways to make democratic resistance impossible. Land is fenced off, guarded, made impassable, and stops being a place where citizens can appear to each other and negotiate the necessities of life. Once land has been remade in various anti-democratic ways, democratic energies can seize up and the opportunity for resistance may pass. Over time, geographies that were designed to dominate, isolate, and extract labor and resources will appear immutable and permanent.

Recall that things and places are, as Arendt taught us, *durable*. This can work both for and against democracy.⁷⁶ Durability can reify a landscape, making it seem permanent and natural to its inhabitants even as it structures their domination. Margaret Kohn explains, “Spatial configurations naturalize social relations by transforming contingent forms into a permanent landscape that appears immutable rather than open to contestation.”⁷⁷ The closure of the land to public negotiation and its apparent immutability serve two groups in particular: those with money (both wealthy individuals and corporations), and those with political power (sovereigns, generally speaking). As David Harvey laments, “geography in particular has far too often functioned and continues to function as a mere handmaid to state power, imperialist politics, and corporate interests.”⁷⁸ The only way out of this problem is through democratic world-building. Those committed to democracy must, therefore, incorporate world-building activities into their theories alongside the practices of voting, representation, and deliberation in the public sphere.

The Problem with Sovereign Mastery

There is still a problem with world-building as I have posed it so far, and this is the problem of mastery. As I have described it, world-building enables humans to separate themselves from nature, exert mastery over their surroundings, and recapture the material bases of their political lives. This account needs to be questioned and refined. In particular, world-building must shed the residue of mastery for two reasons: 1. Action, insofar as it reflects the plurality of the human condition, must retain its essential contingency. Humans are and ought to

⁷⁶ Arendt herself was worried about this problem. See Tsao, "Arendt against Athens: Rereading the Human Condition."

⁷⁷ Margaret Kohn, *Radical Space: Building the House of the People* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 3-4.

⁷⁸ David Harvey, *Cosmopolitanism and the Geographies of Freedom* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 120.

remain unmasterable. 2. Matter is vibrant, it pushes back on our attempts to mold it. Humans are not, and should not envision themselves as, masters of the earth.

1. *“In the realm of human affairs, sovereignty and tyranny are the same.”*

To the first: If, following Arendt, we accept that our collective lives are conditioned by plurality, then it follows that we cannot be in control of how our actions play out in the world. Action is characterized by boundlessness and unpredictability. Sovereignty, for Arendt, is at its core an attempt to control and master human affairs. Thus, she tell us, “in the realm of human affairs sovereignty and tyranny are the same.”⁷⁹ As I argued in Chapter 2, history bears this thesis out.⁸⁰ Successful claims to sovereignty involve exclusion and domination because the claim to sovereignty is always also a claim to world-mastery. This is not to say that non-exclusive and non-dominating movements cannot claim sovereignty, but I question whether what they really seek is sovereignty, or if they are instead engaged in struggles for power that aim to *disrupt* existing sovereignty. The “alternative sovereignties” Honig champions—movements for self-determination over agriculture, pipeline protests, the Mohawk resistance at Kanasatake—do not seek the type of comprehensive control that the sovereignty concept was designed to justify. Indeed, they seek to interrupt that control as it is exerted by states and capitalists.⁸¹

World-building, I have argued, is characterized by action’s radical contingency. Sovereignty is inimical to this contingency. How others will respond to projects in world-buildings, how our attempts at it will play into the already existing horizons of human meaning, what unintended consequences will result—these are and should remain unmasterable. When we are involved in a project that expresses our natality, our ability to bring something new into the

⁷⁹ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 2006 [1963]), 144.

⁸⁰ “Westphalia and the Hidden Tradition of Contested Territory.”

⁸¹ On “alternative sovereignties,” see Honig, *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair*, 20.

world, we will be faced with the natality of others. There will be counter-projects, resistance, and chaos. This is a good thing because it means that no attempt to dominate humans and their environment can ever be complete, and there will always be space for resistance.

The radical contingency of world-building also means that however durable the products of world-building, they should never have a permanently affixed meaning. Take, for example, the city square. The city square draws citizens together and can make space for politics, but it can also be a site of oppression. Images of tightly choreographed military parades in the central square, in societies where the government forbids protest in this same spot, rouse a troubling picture of a place where meaning is not open to contestation.



WWII Victory Day Parade in Moscow, Russia, May 9, 2021. © Evgeny Biyatov / Sputnik

The choreography of the military parade is a show of sovereign mastery. It reminds the people of what they already know—that they cannot interfere with how this space is used. Or consider images from the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, in which the government’s literal flattening of opposition was a special kind of assault on freedom, an assault which symbolically secured the spatial center of the regime against contest. Here is Tiananmen Square on May 17, 1989:



REUTERS/Ed Nachtrieb

And here is the square on June 5, 1989



REUTERS/Stringer

The results of the Chinese regime's capture of its physical center have been the mark of a lasting assault on democracy. To become a center of democratic dwelling, the city square has to be open

to appropriation, its uses contested, its meaning subject to political conflict. In other words, to be a center of democratic dwelling, a place has to be de-centered. Eternity can have no part in democratic dwelling.⁸² This goes for all political claims: To achieve, or claim to achieve, a true and eternal homeland for a people, for example, would preemptively cease the process of homecoming and preclude the possibility of politics and democratic world-building. Therefore, to avoid the tyranny of permanence, any conception of being-at-home-in-the-world must be treated as a regulative aspiration, not an achievable endpoint. The home of a people, understood as its center, is a drain towards which we are drawn, which we circle, but into which we would not want to disappear.

The topic of social mastery also brings me to the topic of private property, which I expect is on the reader's mind. The accumulation of private property is one way that humans become master of a plot of land and shield it from democratic negotiation. In modern Western theories of liberty and private right—e.g. Grotius, Hobbes, Locke, Kant—the private possession of land is posed as a natural right because, they argue, we need to appropriate objects and land for the sake of self-preservation. I reject this idea entirely. It is simply not clear to me why the dictates of self-preservation require the private ownership of property. Why doesn't self-preservation instead dictate interdependence, cooperation, and reciprocity with the neighbors and nonhumans who help keep us alive and sustain us over time?⁸³ Early modern European political philosophy is limited by what we might call an "object possession trap," wherein the unquestioned presupposition of possession is smuggled into theories of liberty, thus limiting their capacity to

⁸² On the attempt to secure eternity through architecture, see Karsten Harries, *The Ethical Function of Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000).

⁸³ I debate these issues with Anna Stilz in Anna Jurkevics and Anna Stilz, "Crises in Territorial Sovereignty: Critical Exchange on Anna Stilz's Territorial Sovereignty: A Philosophical Exploration," *Political Theory* 49, no. 5 (2021).

respond to the full experience that humans have with land.⁸⁴ I have read not a single convincing justification for the idea that the individual ownership of land should be an unnegotiable pre-political right. Until such an account is presented to me, I will insist that the bounds of private property must be settled by the democratic politics of world-building.

In no way do I assume that all private property claims are bad. Small-scale private geographies, especially in the form of small-holdings and stable housing, can contribute to freedom and provide protections for individuals and groups. Unlike large-scale private ownership that monopolizes land, small-holdings can disperse power among citizens. Moreover, privacy is incredibly important for certain dominated groups, such as black women in the United States, whose bodies and maternity have been violently intruded upon throughout the nation's history.⁸⁵ There is room in this theory, therefore, for world-building projects that establish private spaces as a protection against unjust incursions. As a rule, privatization should be limited where it interferes with the criteria of democratic world-building, when it monopolizes land, reduces the public space of the world, and when it makes it impossible for people in and around that land to negotiate its use.

In the end, the line between public and private is always already the outcome of politics, and this line should be challenged in cases where privatization threatens the capacity of residents to take part in, and make a difference in, the politics of the places where they live. For this reason, monopolization of land is inherently suspect, especially if that land is important to the public life of a group of people. For example, if a real-estate developer purchases urban space

⁸⁴ See also Macpherson on the relationship between concepts of "self-ownership" and conceptions of freedom in Hobbes and Locke. C.B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

⁸⁵ Shatema Threadcraft, *Intimate Justice: The Black Female Body and the Body Politic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).t

and forbids its use for protest, he has wrongly impinged on freedom. Furthermore, projects such as private gated communities should be viewed as a *prima facie* violation of democratic world-building because their purpose is to block land from public use and negotiation. The conditions of solidarity are geographical and material, and therefore, in order to take part in politics, individuals need access to each other and to the public.⁸⁶

2. *The Earth Juts through the World*

The second problem with world-building as I have posed it to this point is that it relies on human mastery of nature. The picture of humans provided by Arendt and Hegel is of creatures who separate themselves out from their surroundings, take the earth in as an object, and master it. Consider how Hegel describes Consciousness as active and the matter it encounters as passive: “Thus the individual as *laboring*, is active, and the object gets superseded.”⁸⁷ Ifergan explains, “As labor, practical consciousness mediates between the object’s passivity and the subject’s activity, allowing for sustained reciprocal engagement.”⁸⁸ But what kind of reciprocal engagement with the earth is really possible if it is viewed as a passive substrate, waiting to be molded? A Hegelian might push back: there are moments in Hegel’s account of nature where it is quite lively. In its lively, sensuous aspect, however, nature is a substrate from which Consciousness seeks liberation. Hegel describes the process of externalization as a difficult one because nature is powerful and “entangles us.”⁸⁹ We have to work hard to escape its grip, which is why laboring Consciousness must be cunning. In his lectures on aesthetics, Hegel rails against

⁸⁶ Kohn gives a lengthy account of the geographical and material conditions of solidarity in Margaret Kohn, “The Critique of Possessive Individualism: Solidarism and the City,” *Political Theory* 44, no. 5 (2016). Jane Jacobs also provides a well-known account of the geographical conditions of democratic urban sociality in Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961).

⁸⁷ Hegel, *System of Ethical Life (1802/1803) and First Philosophy of Spirit*, SUNY Press, 230.

⁸⁸ Ifergan, *Hegel’s Discovery of the Philosophy of Spirit: Automy, Alienation, and Ethical Life*, 141.

⁸⁹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, trans. Bernard Bosanquet (London: Penguin, 1993), 55.

the power of the sensuous and poses nature as Spirit's foe. He describes our "sunkeness in nature,"⁹⁰ and man as so "entangled in matter" that the mind is driven to retaliate for "the oppression and violence which itself has experienced from nature."⁹¹ In his lectures on the *Philosophy of History* the problem of being "sunken in nature" appears again, where he has this to say about indigenous Americans:

...this culture was entirely *immersed in Nature*, and... it had to go under at the approach of Spirit. America has always shown itself to be physically and spiritually impotent—and it still does so—for after the Europeans landed, the natives gradually perished at the mere breath of European activity.⁹²

The "bush mode of production" that many Europeans encountered upon arriving in America is, for Hegel, a failure of Spirit because a failure of mastery.⁹³ Indigenous Americans, for Hegel, were afflicted by a curious lack of interest in becoming masters of the Earth. Hegel's offensive sentiments may seem shocking to us today, but to what extent are our theories of freedom still founded on the assumption of mastery that brings him to this conclusion?

Hegel's real attitude towards the earth can be found in his reaction to raw, untouched nature. In one of his early travel diaries, Hegel writes of the Alps "Seeing these dead masses gave me nothing but the monotonous and in time boring idea: this is the way it is."⁹⁴ Raw nature invokes no wonder in Hegel, who believes that "...the mind and its products are higher than

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid., 60.

⁹² Hegel, Introduction to the Philosophy of History, 85. Emphasis mine.

⁹³ On the bush mode of production see Glen Coulthard, *Red Skins, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 171.

⁹⁴ G.W.F. Hegel, "Auszüge Aus Dem Tagebuch Der Reise in Die Berner Oberalpen (25. Juli Bis August 1796)," in *Werke 1, Frühe Schriften*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1971), 618. Cited in Karsten Harries, "Hegel's Aesthetics," Seminar, Fall 2009, Yale University Department of Philosophy, Lecture 3.

nature and its appearances.”⁹⁵ This dismissive attitude towards the non-human informs Hegel’s anthropocentrism. Arendt’s image of *homo faber* as inherently violent thus inherits his assumptions. She writes, “*homo faber*, the creator of the human artifice, has always been a destroyer of nature.”⁹⁶ For Arendt, it is man’s will to master the earth that makes fabrication inherently violent. In the opening pages of the *Human Condition*, she fears that *homo faber*’s drive to liberate man from his material conditions will succeed. Man as maker is impelled to do violence unto nature, and increasingly, to his own nature. The launching of Sputnik, the urge to escape earth’s bounds, to create life in a test-tube, and to increase the human life span *ad infinitum* cause Arendt great distress. But are *homo faber*’s attempts to break from nature really natural? Or are they *outcomes* of the path-dependent processes of land-accumulation and technological mastery that have been key to the development of sovereignty and modern capitalism? Could it have all gone in a different way? Could it still?

To wrench ourselves from these difficulties, we must turn to philosophies that unsettle the depiction of nature as a passive substrate responding to the creativity of humans, mute and ready for molding. This is the aim of the new materialists, who have argued that matter is vibrant and that it pushes back on any human presumption of mastery.⁹⁷ Treating matter as dead is dangerous, they warn us. Jane Bennett writes, “the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption.”⁹⁸ I agree with Bennett. But how can this insight be incorporated into a theory of world-building, a theory that assumes humans are transformers of the earth? Is it possible, against Arendt and

⁹⁵ *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, 4.

⁹⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 139.

⁹⁷ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantam Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007).

⁹⁸ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, ix.

Hegel, to rethink world-building in a way that disentangles its transformative cunning from the impulse to destroy the non-human?

I think it is possible. To begin with, Arendt and Hegel overestimate the human capacity to transform nature according to a plan. We are transformers, and can certainly be destroyers, but we are not *masters*. At times, Arendt seems to have forgotten what Martin Heidegger understood, which is that nature pushes back against our attempts to mold it. Yes, we have the capacity to wreak havoc on our environment, but this is not the *essence* of work. At its best, work is an interplay between our designs and nature's continuous, active response.

In "The Origin of the Work of Art" (1936) Heidegger argues that not all work is equally violent towards the earth. To distinguish modes of work, he sets up a phenomenological scheme in which the world and the earth are engaged in a conflict, or *polemos* (strife), with one another. In distinction to the world, which is made (*nomos*), the earth is given (*physis*). We inquire into the composition of the earth in order to control it, but in so doing we fail to fully comprehend and penetrate it.⁹⁹ No matter how hard we try, we can never fully achieve the Cartesian fantasy of making the earth entirely intelligible, or "clear and distinct". Matter, in its infinite complexity, defies us. Attempts to overcome matter's obscurity must, according to Heidegger, result in destruction:

Earth thus shatters every attempt to penetrate it. It causes every merely calculating importunity upon it to turn into a destruction. This destruction may herald itself under the technical-scientific objectification of nature, but this mastery nevertheless remains an impotence of will.¹⁰⁰

Interestingly, where Hegel sees impotence in indigenous Americans' reconciliation with the power of nature, Heidegger sees impotence in the opposite, in our attempts to master it.

⁹⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 168.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 172.

Poiesis, an aesthetic form of work that does not merely instrumentalize matter, is Heidegger's answer to the violence of mastery. *Poiesis* reveals the essence of truth (*unconcealedness* or *aletheia*) by setting the earth forth (*Her-stellen*) in a way that retains its mystery. It is a way of working that "lets the earth be an earth."¹⁰¹ Moreover, *poiesis* never "uses up" the materials it works with. It allows the materials to push back and make their mark on the work.¹⁰² While Heidegger has art in mind, his analysis can be applied to world-building. The resources with which we labor, the geography into which we to build, the weather and elements that rain down on us, even our bodies themselves—these all contribute not only to the products of our work, but also to the intentions that initiate world-building. We ought to integrate recognition and respect of the vibrancy of the earth in our world-building practices.

Heidegger helps us get beyond the Cartesian fantasy that human beings make fully intelligible those products that they create. Because the "earth juts through world,"¹⁰³ work must defer to its materials, learn from them and make out their impulses. As I discuss below, practices of "grounded normativity" do just this. One might ask whether the idea of reconciling with nature and learning from its impulses Romantic, yearning for an impossible feeling of wholeness that has necessarily been shattered by modern life? No, I do not think it must be. Heidegger makes it clear that the vibrancy of matter also infuses a chaos into human life that exceeds every attempt to contain it. The comforting familiarity of the man-made world, a world carved out of the earth just for us, can never fully expel the frightening reminders of nature's indifferent chaos, the otherness and impenetrability that lurk at the edges of our civilizations.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 173.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 174.

Heidegger thus offers an instructive corrective to the mastery of Hegelian world-building. His own politics are not instructive, but his respect for the vibrancy of the earth and its effect on our attempts to work on it are.¹⁰⁴ Thus the third criterion of democratic world-building is that *the vibrancy and limits of the earth must be respected in order for democratic world-building to be sustainable over time. World-building should not use up the earth.*

The lessons I have pulled from Arendt, Hegel, Habermas, and Heidegger show that it is possible to find threads in the history of European political thought that reject the more dominant theories of that tradition: mastery, sovereignty, object possession, etc. Even theorists of human mastery, like Hegel, tried to grapple with the chaos of nature and human contingency in ways that help illuminate these problems as they continue to beset us. The modern European tradition is a compromised one, but it can still help us flesh out an answer to the question: what does it mean to be free in relationship to land? That said, I do not think the traditional canon of modern European philosophy can get us all the way. To expand our imagination of the alternatives to capitalist land monopolization and sovereign territoriality, we have to listen to those who have knowledge of a different kind of relationship to the land, one that emerged outside the “iron cage” (Weber) of European modernity.

In this context it is absolutely crucial to engage with Glen Coulthard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s theory of *grounded normativity*. They write,

Grounded normativity refers to the ethical frameworks provided by Indigenous place-based practices and associated forms of knowledge. Grounded normativity houses and reproduces the practices and procedures, based on deep reciprocity, that are inherently informed by an intimate relationship to place. Grounded normativity teaches us how to live our lives in relation to other people and nonhuman life forms in a profoundly nonauthoritarian, nondominating, nonexploitive manner. Grounded normativity teaches us how to be in respectful diplomatic relationships with other Indigenous and non-Indigenous nations with whom we might share territorial responsibilities or common

¹⁰⁴ I have set aside Heidegger’s Nazism here because I do not think it penetrates the aspects of his philosophy that I have highlighted. CITE sources.

political or economic interests. *Our relationship to the land itself generates the processes, practices, and knowledges that inform our political systems, and through which we practice solidarity.*¹⁰⁵

According to the theory of grounded normativity, human-to-land relationships deeply influence human-to-human ethics. How we relate to the land will inform how we relate to each other.¹⁰⁶

Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg) thus describes land *as* pedagogy.¹⁰⁷ Coulthard (Yellowknives Dene) is particularly interested in the ethical relations that emerge from the bush mode of production, where reciprocity with nature is key to survival, or what European philosophers call self-preservation. In this mode of production, it is not uncommon to ask animals and plants for permission to harvest them. On the face of it, one might ask why a human would ask an animal, which cannot speak back, for permission to kill it.¹⁰⁸ Asking permission is a gesture of respect and a way of giving thanks for what is needed. It draws the hunter's awareness to the idea that the animal, in providing sustenance, is giving a gift. In this sense, the hunter forces herself to engage in an internal deliberation in which she considers the necessity of the kill. Asking permission is also a way of recognizing that permission could be denied—perhaps the hunter realizes that the animal is too young, that it is carrying offspring, or even that it is too scared.¹⁰⁹ Asking permission is a way cultivate responsiveness to non-humans and learn

¹⁰⁵ Glen Coulthard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, "Grounded Normativity / Place-Based Solidarity," *American Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (2016): 254. See also Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Coulthard, *Red Skins, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. Emphasis mine.

¹⁰⁶ From this point of view, it should not be surprising that early modern European theories of object possession emerged from agricultural societies engaging in land enclosure.

¹⁰⁷ CITE Simpson, *Land as Pedagogy*.

¹⁰⁸ I thank my indigenous students, especially Kyla LeSage, for bringing these practices to my attention. LeSage's term paper, "Returning to Indigenous Knowledge: Comparing Notions of Land and Consent," has influenced my thinking on this topic. In it, she critiques Locke's theory of consent for excluding non-humans. She illuminates how non-humans can give consent and how these practices of non-human consent can and should be integrated into human ethics.

¹⁰⁹ Fear can be discovered after the fact when the meat is tough, which is a sign of adrenaline. This discovery prompts certain indigenous peoples to abstain from using the animal in the ordinary ways to express remorse for cruelty. I thank my student Hannah Stanley for bringing this practice to my attention.

their cycles and needs.¹¹⁰ We can then bring this cultivation to human discourses regarding what we need to live. Harvesters depend upon the knowledge produced in this process for sustainable hunting over time. The sensitivity that is learned from asking for permission will inevitably be carried over to human-human practices. The acknowledgment of nature's gifts often informs an ethic of reciprocity and generosity among those who rely on the bush mode of production.

Grounded normativity also dispenses with the assumption that we must separate ourselves from nature in order to feel at home in the world. Being at home in the world can also be established by gaining practical knowledge of earth and integrating ourselves into it. This approach rejects Hegel's idea that humans mold the earth in a one-way relationship. It similarly rejects Locke's claim that when we mix our labor with the land we infuse something of value into the land, while the land puts nothing back into us. The theory of grounded normativity acknowledges that *the land also mixes its knowledge into us* when we establish a reciprocal relationship with it. This process has the capacity to change us and therefore takes on an emancipatory dimension that can be compared with Hegel's cunning of labor. The reciprocal relationship of grounded normativity has the advantage that it does not lead to needless destruction.

Long have theorists connected the domination of the earth to the domination of humans – there is certainly something to this idea.¹¹¹ Too stark a separation from nature obscures the sense in which we are always embedded in reciprocal relationships with non-humans, whether we acknowledge it or not. Grounded normativity can help us correct this mistake without requiring

¹¹⁰ My discussion here is informed by CITE KIMMERER, *BRAIDING SWEETGRASS*

¹¹¹ Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980); Karen Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000). The premise that the domination of nature is linked to our domination of each other also appears in Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1989).

that we all switch over to the bush mode of production. For example, what would it mean to bring meat harvesting back into public view, out of the shrouded horrors of industrialized slaughter? The problem with factory farms is not just that they violate animal rights, but that they alienate us from the creatures that sustain us. If we are faced with what animals must suffer for us, we might become more grateful to them and change our practices and laws to reflect that. The good news is that it is possible, even in urban and highly developed areas, to re-establish ethical relations with non-humans and so to experiment with how these reformulated relationships may become the basis for democratic politics.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented an anti-sovereigntist theory of democratic *world-building*. Democratic world-building encompasses the material practices through which communities build, rebuild, negotiate, and govern their shared physical world. These practices include zoning, the regulation of infrastructure and public things, land use and food production, housing and tenancy rights, negotiation of the property regime, and the regulation of resources and ecosystems. I have argued that the practices of world-building must be incorporated into democratic theory so that we can respond to the crises of land governance in the modern world. Democracy, as I have conceived it here, ought to be understood as *participation in rule* rather than popular sovereignty. Sovereignty, because of its exclusivity and reliance on land-mastery, is inimical to democratic land practices.

In the next chapter I turn to the institutional implications of this argument and answer the following questions: Can democracy be reconciled with overlapping jurisdictions? What is the people and how are its boundaries determined in an anti-sovereigntist theory of democracy?