

surprising technological savvy, for better or worse, of today's migrants from developing world to Euro-world. The second appraises the workings of contested environmental imaginations, official versus vernacular, especially in modern India, as the latter have struggled against the ethnic cleansing effect of top-down protectionist designs. The third reflects on the relation between the historian's craft and the art of historical fiction with special reference to the *Ibis* trilogy of novels about the British-Sino-Indian opium trade in the early nineteenth century. The last of these essays was published in a major scholarly journal. All three could easily have been had the author so wished.

All three, happily, are also eminently readable by nonspecialists, as is all of Ghosh's work, however erudite. He has never been comfortable for long operating within standard cloistral venues or protocols, and this collection testifies to that as well, as in "Confessions of a Xenophile" (chapter 13), a delightful familiar essay where the author as inveterate traveler is in the ascendant, and a dozen or more pieces short and long that demonstrate the investigative passion for unearthing oral or documentary testimony by obscure or forgotten witnesses that movingly refute official accounts of wars and other crises, like four chapters that feature overlooked testimony by Indian enlistees in World War I swept up in Britain's most disastrous Middle Eastern campaigns.

Now at the summit of his career, Ghosh is widely, and understandably, reckoned a strong contender for Nobel literature honors. Should that final assize come to pass, this miscellany will not weigh so heavily as such sustained achievements as *In an Antique Land*, *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry Tide* (2004), the *Ibis* trilogy, *The Great Derangement*, and *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2021). But many of the essays in *Wild Fictions* are indispensably revealing pendants to those major works; and the best of them no inquiring reader with even a passing interest in the issues in question will want to miss.

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Camila Vergara. *Systemic Corruption: Constitutional Ideas for an Anti-Oligarchic Republic*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2020. 312 pp.

MIKKEL FLOHR

Camila Vergara's *Systemic Corruption: Constitutional Ideas for an Anti-Oligarchic Republic* is a bold and imaginative work of republican political theory that combines original reinterpretations of the history of political thought with elaborate institutional proposals for reforming liberal democracy today in order to counter its oligarchic tendencies and decay. The book is divided into three parts. The first part starts from the problematic of *systemic corruption*, which Vergara identifies with the continuous and systematic (fully legal and institutionalized) accumulation of wealth and power amongst elites. Liberal democracies remain unable to address this oligarchization because they conceive their constituency as an undifferentiated people and cannot grasp or address its internal divisions.

Vergara therefore turns towards republicanism, which has historically focused on the division and conflict between the few and the many and proposed a so-called mixed constitution as a means of dividing power between them and counteracting tendencies towards oligarchic domination and destabilization. Vergara identifies two strands of republican thinking about the mixed constitution, distinguishable by their attribution of final decision-making power to either the few or the many. While the former elitist-proceduralist strand

has historically been dominant and remains so to this day, Vergara wants to recover and develop the latter plebeian-materialist strand.

The second part of the book recovers central parts of this lost plebeian-materialist republican tradition of constitutional thought as a means of generating novel institutional solutions to the systemic corruption of contemporary liberal democracy in the third part of the book. Vergara starts from Niccolò Machiavelli's understanding of society as divided into a powerful elite and a common people whose power must be institutionalized to create a free and stable society. There can be no illusion of equality before the law or of class-neutral institutions—both central features of contemporary liberal democracy or, seemingly, even a horizon of a classless society. There will always be a division between the elites who rule and the common people who are ruled. It is therefore necessary to develop institutions that will delimit the authority of the elites and allow the common people to check and resist their power. Vergara looks to Nicolas de Condorcet's designs for a representative assembly accountable to a network of local primary assemblies, Rosa Luxemburg's and Hannah Arendt's engagement with council democracy, and John McCormick's and Lawrence Hamilton's proposals for reviving the plebeian tribunate.

The third and final part of the book engages with contemporary republican thought and develops detailed institutional plans for a fourth plebeian branch of government that can be integrated in contemporary liberal democracies (in an epilogue aptly titled "What Is to Be Done?" she also proceeds to address how this might be attained). This fourth branch would consist of an expansive network of popular local assemblies with the power to both initiate and block legislation, policies, appointments, and more and a plebeian tribunate with the power to enforce the former's decisions and prosecute officials. The aim is not to realize popular power as such but to create popular, antioligarchic institutions that can check the power of elites and counteract liberal democracy's tendency towards systemic corruption and the resulting decline and decay. In this regard, Vergara's work is a bold and provocative proposal for how to reform, rather than replace, liberal democracy. The imaginative use of the history of political thought to develop concrete institutional proposals that address the contemporary crisis of liberal democracy is inspiring, even if such concrete institutional proposals are always easy to fault or disagree with, but that would be to miss the point. The point of this book, the way that I read it, is to get us started thinking about how we might (re-)organize our collective lives so as to overcome rampant systemic corruption.

Despite these virtues, the commitment to the model of the mixed constitution remains underdeveloped. It is never sufficiently elucidated why the plebeian-materialist strand of republicanism must necessarily accept and accommodate a ruling elite in its (mixed) constitutional design. In this regard, Vergara's plebeian republican constitutionalism appears more concerned with counteracting the destabilizing effects of systemic corruption on liberal democracy through a mixed constitution than with overcoming oligarchic rule and establishing democracy. While it seems plausible that we may never be able to fully eliminate the possibility of elites emerging and consolidating power—and should therefore continue to maintain measures to counteract and contain oligarchization—it does not necessarily follow that we should stop trying to overcome the split between rulers and ruled and simply accommodate the rule of elites as a necessary evil.

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Theory and Event, European Journal of Sociology, Contemporary Political Theory, and Rethinking Marxism.

Claire Zimmerman. *Albert Kahn Inc.: Architecture, Labor, and Industry, 1905–1961.* Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2025. 488 pp.

JACOBÉ HUET

Some books in architectural history rival the monumentality of buildings themselves. Claire Zimmerman's *Albert Kahn Inc.: Architecture, Labor, and Industry, 1905–1961* is one such case. It evokes monumentality not only in its physical heft but in its landmark contribution to the field, offering what Zimmerman describes as an “alternative history of modern architecture that redirects attention to the masses of buildings that underpinned American empire, but that remained often unaccounted for in accounts of twentieth-century architecture” (p. xix). The author develops her narrative through a series of thematic chapters, beginning with biographical insights into the family business, moving into its historical context, and continuing with considerations of planning, construction, and ultimately, occupancy. From here, one might ask whether Zimmerman's book remonumentalizes Albert Kahn's factories, hangars, and plants, buildings that once functioned as monuments to capitalism, signaling it on a grand scale but, as she convincingly shows, consistently neglected by mainstream architectural history. The kind of discursive monumentalizing the book performs is critical and reflective rather than self-aggrandizing, memorializing a defunct yet still painfully resonant phase of capitalism.

What counts as alternative in “alternative history” is, of course, highly disputed, raising the question of whether the book ultimately unsettles or reinforces established narratives in architectural history. The issue is especially pertinent given that the book is far from the first monograph on Kahn. Zimmerman cites seven prior book-length studies early in her introduction. However, the author presents her book as the first to locate Kahn's work intentionally and systematically within its ideological nexus, centered on capitalism. This position induces a distinctive scale for the inquiry, one that is both fluctuating and productive. It's not just a book on Kahn—although he remains the principal figure—nor just on the collaborators in his firm. It certainly is a book about Detroit, where the firm was based and left the most visible mark, but not only about Detroit because Albert Kahn Inc. operated globally (I recommend that readers linger on the striking world map in the preface). At times, the book extends claims on architecture and capitalism as a whole, beyond narrow definitions of places and protagonists. Though especially germane to Americanists, the book's shifting scale ensures its acute relevance to broad audiences, including all who study architecture as a locus of power and ideology.

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