

Elements of Primitive Accumulation: Capital, Expropriation, and Exploitation



The new constitutionalism is not simply about the dialectic of revolution and constitutionalism (restoration), but an ongoing attempt in each historical era to instantiate moments of dispossession and violence in law in order to give these acts of capitalist appropriation the appearance of legitimacy and consensus. In other words, what we are most concerned with here is the sanctioning of dispossession and a unique, mode of exploitation in and by the state and how this is not only secured in law but how this also helps to define and redefine notions of the political and opportunities for change.

In 1843-4, after having begun his journey of critique by confronting Hegelian idealism, Marx encountered the ideas of political economists. In his first manuscripts to engage political economy he wrote:

Political economy proceeds from the fact of private property, but it does not explain it to us. It expresses in general, abstract formulae the material process through which private property actually passes, and these formulae it then takes for laws. It does not comprehend these laws, it does not demonstrate how they arise from the very nature of private property...It assumes as fact, in historical form, what has to be explained.¹

What had to be explained, of course, was the origin of capitalist private property. This is what led Marx to challenge the model of 'primitive accumulation' put forward by bourgeois or liberal political economists. This is why Part Eight of Capital Volume One, is entitled '**so-called**' primitive accumulation:

The essence of Marx's critique of 'the so-called primitive accumulation' (and people too often miss the significance of the phrase 'so-called') is that no amount of accumulation, whether from outright theft, from imperialism, from commercial profit, or itself constitutes capital, nor will it produce capitalism. The specific precondition of capitalism is a transformation of social property relations that generates capitalist 'laws of motion': the imperatives of competition and profit-maximization, a compulsion to reinvest surpluses, and a systematic and relentless need to improve labor-productivity and develop the forces of production.²

Let us now turn to Marx's critique of 'so-called' primitive accumulation so that we are in a better position to understand the points of contact between this radical critique and our current project.

¹ Karl Marx. *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, in Michael L. Morgan, Ed. (1992). *Classics of Moral and Political Philosophy*. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company), p. 1159-1160.

² Ellen Meiksins Wood (2002). *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View*. (London: Verso), p. 37.

Part Eight

So-Called Primitive Accumulation

Chapter 26: The Secret of Primitive Accumulation

In the opening of this section Marx tells the reader that the ‘accumulation of capital presupposes surplus-value; surplus value presupposes capitalist production; capitalist production presupposes the availability of capital and labour-power in the hands of commodity producers.’ He says that this logic ‘seems to turn around in a never-ending circle which we can only get out of by assuming a primitive accumulation which *precedes* capitalist accumulation; an accumulation which is not the result of the capitalist mode of production but its **point of departure**.’ (p. 873).

So here, Marx suggests that primitive accumulation should be conceived of as a point of departure for capitalism. Let’s pay attention to see whether he will not only suggest it as a point of departure, but as an immanent aspect of capitalism that continues over time.

Having set up the problematic, now Marx takes the time to poke fun at the ‘insipid childishness’ of the liberals:

‘This primitive accumulation plays approximately the same role in political economy as original sin does in theology. Adam bit the apple, and thereupon sin fell on the human race. Its origin is supposed to be explained when it is told as an anecdote about the past. Long, long ago there were two sorts of people; one, the diligent, intelligent and above all frugal elite; the other, lazy rascals, spending their substance, and more, in riotous living. The legend of theological original sin tells us certainly how man came to be condemned to eat his bread in the sweat of his brow; but the history of economic original sin reveals to us that there are people to whom this is by no means essential. Never mind! Thus it came to pass that the former sort accumulated wealth, and the latter sort finally had nothing to sell except their own skins. And from this original sin dates the poverty of the great majority who, despite all their labor, have up to now nothing to sell but themselves, and the wealth of the few that increases constantly, although they have long ceased to work. Such insipid childishness is every day preached to us in the defense of property’ (p. 873).

Now Marx tries to smash this nursery tale to bits:

‘In actual history, it is a notorious fact that conquest, enslavement, robbery murder, in short, force, plays the greatest part. In the tender annals of political economy, the idyllic reigns from time immemorial...As a matter of fact, the methods of primitive accumulation are anything but idyllic. (p. 874).

And now we get Marx’s concern for the historical specificity of capitalism:

‘In themselves, money and commodities are no more capital than the means of production and subsistence are. They need to be transformed into capital. But this transformation can itself only take place under **particular circumstances**, which meet together at this point: the confrontation of, and the contact between, two very different kinds of commodity owners; on the one hand, the owners of money, means of production, means of subsistence, who are eager to valorize the sum of values they have appropriated by buying the labor-power of others; on the other hand, free workers, the sellers of their own labor-power, and therefore the sellers of labor. Free workers, in the double sense that they neither form part of the means of production themselves, as would be the case with slaves, serfs, etc., nor do they own the means of production, as would be the case with self-

employed peasant proprietors. The free workers are therefore free from, unencumbered by, any means of production of their own.’ (p. 874).

He continues...

‘The capitalist presupposes a complete separation between the workers and the ownership of the conditions for the realization of their labor. As soon as capitalist production stands on its own feet, it not only maintains this separation, but reproduces it on a constantly extending scale. **The process, therefore, which creates the capital-relation can be nothing other than the process which divorces the worker from the ownership of the conditions of his labor;** it is a process which operates two transformations, whereby the social means of subsistence and production are turned into capital, and the immediate producers are turned into wage-laborers.’

And from this, Marx derives the critique that:

‘So-called primitive accumulation, therefore is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production. It appears as ‘primitive’ because it forms the pre-history of capital, and of the mode of production corresponding to capital (p. 874-5).

Now Marx discusses how this transformation – or the development of capitalist society – grew out of feudalism and notes the following:

‘Hence the historical movement which changes the producers into wage-laborers appears, on the one hand, as their emancipation from serfdom and from the fetters of the guilds, and it is this aspect of the movement which alone exists for the bourgeois historians. But on the other hand, these newly freed men became sellers of themselves only after they had been robbed of all their own means of production, and all the guarantees of existence afforded by the old feudal arrangements. And this history, the history of their expropriation, is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire.’ (p. 875).

‘The starting-point of the development that gave rise both to the wage-laborer and to the capitalist was the enslavement of the worker. The advance made consisted in a change in the form of this servitude, in the transformation of feudal exploitation into capitalist exploitation.’ (p. 875).

In the last section of the chapter Marx tells us that the capitalist era dates from the 16th century that it coincides with the abolition of serfdom, and that he will look at the history of expropriation through the eyes of England, since this is where it has its classical form:

‘In the history of primitive accumulation, all revolutions are epoch-making that act as levers for the capitalist class in the course of its formation; but this is true above all for those moments when great masses of men are suddenly and forcibly torn from their means of subsistence, and hurled onto the labor-market as free, unprotected, and rightless proletarians. The expropriation of the agricultural producer, of the peasant, from the soil is the basis of this whole process. The history of expropriation assumes different aspects in different countries...’ (p. 876).

Chapter 27: The Expropriation of the Agricultural Population from the Land

In the opening of this chapter Marx notes that serfdom had disappeared in England by the last part of the 14th century and that the number of persons who worked their own land was greater at this time, than the number of those who farmed the land for other people. He notes how these ‘free peasant proprietors’ had access – indeed the right – to exploit common land and reminds us in a footnote that we should never forget that serfs were co-proprietors of the common land. (p. 877).

Now Marx tells us that:

‘The prelude to the revolution that laid the foundation of the capitalist mode of production was played out in the last third of the 15th century and the first few decades of the 16th. A mass of ‘free’ and unattached proletarians was hurled onto the labor-market by the dissolution of the bands of feudal retainers...’ (p. 878).

Now Marx says that although the ‘royal power’ forcibly hastened the dissolution of retainers because absolute sovereignty could not be had without this abolition, the ‘royal power’ was not the sole cause of the dissolution of feudalism:

‘It was rather that the great feudal lords, in their defiant opposition to the king and Parliament, created an incomparably larger proletariat by forcibly driving the peasantry from the land, to which the latter had the same feudal title as the lords themselves, and by usurpation of the common lands. The rapid expansion of wool manufacture in Flanders and the corresponding rise in the price of wool in England provided the direct impulse for these evictions.’ (p. 878).

‘The new nobility was the child of its time, for which money was the power of all powers. Transformation of arable land into sheep-walks was therefore its slogan.’ (p. 879).

Now Marx runs through some legal attempts by the King (Henry VII and others) to slow down the pace of the enclosures since these movements were causing greater and greater social dislocations:

‘Legislation shrunk back in the face of this immense change. It did not yet stand at the high level of civilization where the ‘wealth of the nation’ (i.e. the formation of capital and the reckless exploitation and impoverishment of the mass of the people) figures as the uttermost limit of all statecraft.’ (p. 879).

On top of the expropriation of the mass of people resulting from ‘the corresponding rise in the price of wool’ Marx notes another phase:

‘The process of forcible expropriation of the people received a new and terrible impulse in the 16th century from the Reformation, and the consequent colossal spoliation (plunder) of church property. The Catholic church was, at the time of the Reformation, the feudal proprietor of a great part of the soil of England. The dissolution of the monasteries, etc., hurled their inmates into the proletariat. The estates of the church were to a large extent given away to rapacious royal favorites, or sold at a nominal price to speculating farmers and townsmen, who drove out old-established hereditary sub-tenants in great numbers, and threw their holdings together.’ (p. 882).

Marx notes that by about 1750 the yeomanry had disappeared and by the last decade of this same century, ‘the last trace of the land of the agricultural laborer.’ Now Marx turns his attention to a discussion of the violent means employed during this agricultural revolution and says that after the restoration of the Stuarts (1660-1714):

‘...the landed proprietors carried out, by legal means, an act of usurpation which was effected everywhere on the Continent without any legal formality. They abolished the feudal tenure of land, i.e. they got rid of all its obligations to the state, ‘indemnified’ (to secure against hurt, loss, or damage) the state by imposing taxes on the peasantry and the rest of the people, established for themselves the rights of modern private property in estates to which they had only a feudal title, and, finally, passed those laws of settlement which had the same effect on the English agricultural laborer...’ (p. 883-4).

‘The ‘glorious Revolution’ brought into power, along with William of Orange, the landed and capitalist profit-grubbers. They inaugurated the new era by practicing on a colossal scale the **thefts of state lands which had hitherto been managed more modestly**. These estates were **given away, sold at ridiculous prices, or even annexed to private estates by direct seizure**. All this happened without the slightest observance of legal etiquette. The Crown lands thus fraudulently appropriated, together with the stolen Church estates, in so far as

these were not lost again during the republican revolution, form the basis of the present princely domains of the English oligarchy. (p. 884).

Now Marx gets back to communal property:

‘Communal property – which is entirely distinct from the state property we have just been considering – was an old Teutonic institution which lived on under the cover of feudalism. We have seen how its forcible usurpation, generally accompanied by the turning of arable into pasture land, begins at the end of the 15th century and extends into the 16th. But at that time the process was carried on by means of individual acts of violence against which legislation, for a hundred and fifty years, fought in vain. The advance made by the 18th century shows itself in this, **that the law itself now becomes the instrument by which the people’s land is stolen**, although the big farmers made use of their little independent methods as well.’ (p. 885).

‘The Parliamentary form of the robbery is that of ‘Bills for Enclosure of Commons’, in other words decrees by which the landowners grant themselves the people’s land as their private property, decrees of expropriation of the people.’ (p. 886).

‘...the systematic theft of communal property was of great assistance, alongside the theft of the state domains, in swelling those large farms which were called in the 18th century capital farms, or merchant farms, and in ‘setting free’ the agricultural population as a proletariat for the needs of industry.’ (p. 886).

Marx then goes on to give a few historical examples of how the concentration in land ownership is creating more misery and greater poverty. He then notes how the agricultural population was not compensated for the millions of acres of common land stolen from 1801 to 1831 by acts of Parliament.

‘The last great process of expropriation of the agricultural population from the soil is, finally, the so-called ‘clearing of estates’, i.e. the sweeping of human beings off the land.’ (p. 889). [Marx’s example here is the Highlands of Scotland where this process of clearing humans off the land was the most systematic.](#)

Now Marx sums up the chapter:

‘The spoliation of the Church’s property, the fraudulent alienation of the state domains, the theft of common lands, the usurpation of feudal and clan property and its transformation into modern private property under circumstances of ruthless terrorism, all these things were just so many idyllic methods of primitive accumulation. They conquered the field for capitalist agriculture, incorporated the soil into capital, and created for the urban industries the necessary supplies of free and rightless proletarians. (p. 895).

Chapter 28: Bloody Legislation Against the Expropriated Since the End of the 15th Century. The Forcing Down of Wages by Act of Parliament

In the opening section of this chapter Marx tells us that the proletariat created by forcible expropriation and the dissolution of feudal retainers could not be absorbed fast enough by the nascent industrialization of the country. Consequently, many were turned into ‘beggars, robbers and vagabonds’. This chapter is dedicated to a survey of some of the legislation that was used to police this new class of vagabonds and paupers. A few quotes may be worth noting:

‘Thus were the agricultural folk first forcibly expropriated from the soil, driven from their homes, turned into vagabonds, and then whipped, branded and tortured by grotesquely terroristic laws into accepting the discipline necessary for the system of wage-labor. (p. 899).

‘The advance of capitalist production develops a working class which by education, tradition and habit looks upon the requirements of that mode of production as self-evident natural laws’. (p. 899).

‘In the ordinary run of things, the worker can be left to the ‘natural laws of production’, i.e. it is possible to rely on his dependence on capital, which springs from the conditions of production themselves, and is guaranteed in perpetuity by them. It is otherwise during the historical genesis of capitalist production. The rising bourgeoisie **needs the power of the state**, and uses it to ‘regulate’ wages, i.e. to force them into the limits suitable for making a profit, to lengthen the working day, and to keep the worker himself at his normal level of dependence. This is an essential aspect of so-called primitive accumulation.’ (p. 900).

Chapter 29: The Genesis of the Capitalist Farmer

The chapter opens with a review of what Marx has done so far and a new question:

‘Now that we have considered the forcible creation of a class of free and rightless proletarians, the bloody discipline that turned them into wage-laborers, the disgraceful proceedings of the state which employed police methods to accelerate the accumulation of capital by increasing the degree of exploitation of labor, the question remains: where did the capitalists spring from? **For the only class created directly by the expropriation of the agricultural population is that of the great landed proprietors.** As far as the genesis of the farmers is concerned, however, we can so to speak put our finger on it, because it is a slow process evolving through many centuries. (p. 905).

Here Marx makes a distinction between farmer and peasant. The chief difference being that the farmer employs more wage-labor. The farmer pays a part of the surplus product produced on this plot in money or in kind to the landlord as ground rent. With the usurpation of common lands, Marx argues that the farmer could augment his stock of cattle, which meant a richer supply of manure needed to cultivate / fertilize the soil. In addition:

‘The progressive fall in the value of the precious metals, and therefore of money, brought golden fruit to the farmers. Apart from all the other circumstances...it lowered wages. A portion of the latter was no added to the profits of the farm. The continuous rise in the prices of corn, wool, meat, in short of all agricultural products swelled the money capital of the farmer without any action on his part, while the ground rent he had to pay diminished, since it had been contracted for on the basis of the old money values. Thus he grew rich at the expense of both his laborers and his landlords’ (p. 906).

Chapter 30: Impact of the Agricultural Revolution on Industry. The creation of a Home Market for Industrial Capital

This chapter opens up with Marx discussing how ‘the **intermittent but constantly renewed expropriation and expulsion** of the agricultural population supplied the urban industries’ with workers.

‘...the thinning out of the independent self-supporting peasants corresponded directly with the concentration of the industrial proletariat...’ (p. 908).

‘In spite of the small number of cultivators, the soil brought forth as much produce as before, or even more because the revolution in property relations on the land was accompanied by improved methods of cultivation, greater co-operation, a higher concentration of the means of production and so on, and because the agricultural wage-laborers were made to work at a higher level of intensity, and the field of production on which they worked for themselves shrank more and more.’ (p. 908).

‘With the ‘setting free’ of a part of the agricultural population, therefore, their former means of nourishment were also set free. They were now transformed into material elements of variable capital. The peasant, expropriated and cast adrift, had to obtain the value of the means of subsistence from his new lord, the industrial capitalist, in the form of wages.’ (p. 909).

‘You cannot tell from looking at the large factories and the large farms that they have originated from the combination of many small centers of production, and have been built up by the expropriation of many small independent producers.’ (p. 909).

In the last part of this section Marx offers a key insight into the history of expropriation / primitive accumulation:

‘A consistent foundation for capitalist agriculture could only be provided by large-scale industry which radically expropriates the vast majority of the agricultural population and completes the divorce between agriculture and rural domestic industry, tearing up the latter’s roots, which are spinning and weaving. It therefore also conquers the entire home market for industrial capital for the first time.’ (p. 912).

Chapter 31: The Genesis of the Industrial Capitalist

‘The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of blackskins, are all things which characterize the dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the **chief moments of primitive accumulation**. Hard on their heels follows the commercial war of the European nations, which has the globe as its battlefield.’ (p. 915).

‘The different **moments of primitive accumulation** can be assigned in particular to Spain, Portugal, Holland, France and England, in more or less chronological order. These different moments are **systematically combined** together at the end of the 17th century in England; the combination embraces the colonies, the national debt, the modern tax system, and the system of protection. These methods depend in part on brute force, for instance the colonial system. But they all employ the power of the state, **the concentrated and organized force of society**, to hasten, as in a hothouse, the process of transformation of the feudal mode of production into the capitalist mode, and to shorten the transition. Force is the midwife of every old society which is pregnant with a new one. It is itself an economic power.’ (p. 916).

‘The colonial system ripened trade and navigation as in a hothouse. The ‘companies called **Monopolia**’ (Luther) were powerful levers for the concentration of capital. The colonies provided a market for the budding manufactures, and a vast increase in accumulation which was guaranteed by the mother country’s monopoly of the market. The treasures captured outside Europe by undisguised looting, enslavement and murder flowed back to the mother-country and were turned into capital there.’ (p. 918).

‘Today, industrial supremacy brings with it commercial supremacy. In the period of manufacture it is the reverse; commercial supremacy produces industrial predominance. Hence the preponderant role of the colonial system...it proclaimed the making of profit as the ultimate and the sole purpose of mankind.’ (p. 918).

‘The system of public credit, i.e. of national debts, the origins of which are to be found in Genoa and Venice as early as the Middle Ages, took possession of Europe as a whole during the period of manufacture. The colonial system, with its maritime trade and its commercial wars, served as a forcing-house for the credit system. Thus it first took root in Holland. The national debt, i.e. the alienation [**Verauserung** – **meaning alienation by sale**] of the state – whether the state is despotic, constitutional or republican – marked the capitalist era with its stamp.

The only part of the so-called national wealth that actually enters the collective possession of a modern nation is – the national debt. Hence, quite consistently with this, the modern doctrine that a nation becomes the richer the more deeply it is in debt. Public credit becomes the *credo* of capital. And with the rise of national debt-making, lack of faith in the national debt takes the place of the sing against the Holy Ghost, for which there is no forgiveness.’ (p. 919)

‘The public debt becomes one of the most powerful levers of primitive accumulation. As with the stroke of an enchanter’s wand, it endows unproductive money with the power of creation and thus turns it into capital, without forcing it to expose itself to the troubles and risks inseparable from its employment in industry or even in usury. The state’s creditors actually give nothing away, for the sum lent is transformed into public bonds, easily negotiable, which go on functioning in their hands just as so much hard cash would. But furthermore, and quite apart from the class of idle *rentiers* thus created, the improvised wealth of the financiers who paly the role of middlemen between the government and the nation, and the tax-farmers, merchants and private manufacturers, for whom a good part of every national loan performs the service of a capital fallen from heaven, apart from all these people, the national debt ahs given rise to joint-stock companies, to dealings in negotiable effects of all kinds, and to speculation; in a word, it has given rise to stock-exchange gambling and the modern bankocracy.’ (p. 919).

‘Along with the national debt there arose an international credit system, which often conceals one of the **sources of primitive accumulation** in this or that people. Thus the villainies of the Venetian system of robbery formed one of the secret foundations of Holland’s wealth in capital, for Venice in her of decadence lent large sums of money to Holland.’ (p. 920).

‘As the national debt is back by the revenues of the state, which must cover the annual interest payments etc., the modern system of taxation was the necessary complement of the system of national loans. The loans enable the government to meet extraordinary expenses without the taxpayers feeling it immediately, but they still make increased taxes necessary as a consequence.’ (p. 921).

‘The modern fiscal system, whose pivot is formed by taxes on the most necessary means of subsistence (and therefore by increases in their prices), thus contains within itself the germ of automatic progression. Over-taxation is not an accidental occurrence, but rather a principle.’ (p. 921).

‘There are no two opinions about this (the forcible expropriation resulting from over-taxation), even among the bourgeois economist. Its effectiveness as an **expropriating agent** is heightened still further by the system of protection, which forms one of its integral parts.’ (p. 921).

‘The system of protection was an artificial means of manufacturing manufacturers, or expropriating independent workers, of capitalizing the national means of production and subsistence, and of forcibly cutting short the transition from a mode of production that was out of date to the modern mode of production.’ (p. 922).

‘The European states tore each other to pieces to gain the patent of this invention, and, once they had entered into the service of the profit-mongers, they did not restrict themselves to plundering their own people, indirectly through protective duties, directly through export premiums, in the pursuit of this purpose. They also forcibly uprooted all industries in the neighboring dependent countries, as for example England did with Irish woolen manufacture.’ (p. 922).

‘Colonial system, public debts, heavy taxes, protection, commercial wars, etc., these offshoots of manufacture swell to gigantic proportion during the period of infancy of large-scale industry. The birth of the latter is celebrated by a vast, Herod-like slaughter of the innocents. Like the royal navy, the factories were recruited by means of the press-gang (a detachment of men under command of an officer empowered to force men into military or naval service).’ (p. 922).

‘The profits of manufacturers were enormous; but this only whetted the appetite that it should have satisfied.’ (p. 923).

In the next few pages Marx discusses childhood labor and slavery in the New World and ends with this:

‘So great was the effort to unleash the ‘eternal natural laws’ of the capitalist mode of production, to complete the process of separation between the workers and the conditions of their labor, to transform, at one pole, the social means of production and subsistence into capital, and at the opposite pole, the mass of the population into wage-laborers, into the free ‘laboring poor’, that artificial product of modern history. If money, according to Augier, ‘comes into the world with a congenital blood-stain on one cheek,’ capital comes dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt.’ (p. 925-6).

Chapter 32: The Historical Tendency of Capitalist Accumulation

Marx opens the chapter with the following:

‘What does the **primitive accumulation** of capital, i.e. its historical genesis, resolve itself into? In so far as it is not the direct transformation of slaves and serfs into wage-laborers, and therefore a mere change of form, it only means the expropriation of the immediate producers, i.e. the dissolution of private property based on the labor of its owner. Private property, as the antithesis to social, collective property, exists only where the means of labor and the external conditions of labor belong to private individuals. But according to whether these private individuals are workers or non-workers, private property has a different character.’ (p. 927).

Now Marx turns his attention to the private property of the worker:

‘This mode of production presupposes the fragmentation of holdings, and the dispersal of the other means of production. As it excludes the concentration of these means of production, so it also excludes co-operation, division of labor within each separate process of production, the social control and regulation of the forces of nature, and the free development of the productive forces of society. It is compatible only with a system of production and a society moving within narrow limits which are of natural origin.’ (p. 928).

‘At a certain stage of development, it brings into the world the material means of its own destruction. From that moment, new forces and new passions spring up in the bosom of society, forces and passions which feel themselves to be fettered by that society. It has to be annihilated; it is annihilated. Its annihilation, the transformation of the individualized and scattered means of production into socially concentrated means of production, the transformation, therefore, of the dwarf-like property of the many into the giant property of the few, and the expropriation of the great mass of the people from the soil, from the means of subsistence and from the instruments of labor, this terrible and arduously accomplished expropriation of the mass of the people forms the pre-history of capital. It comprises a whole series of forcible methods we have only passed in review those that have been epoch-making as methods of the **primitive accumulation** of capital. The expropriation of the direct producers was accomplished by means of the most merciless barbarism, and under the stimulus of the most infamous, the most sordid, the most petty and the most odious of passions.’ (p. 928).

‘...as soon as the capitalist mode of production stands on its own feet, the further socialization of labor and the further transformation of the soil and other means of production into socially exploited and therefore communal

means of production takes on a new form. What is now to be expropriated is not the self-employed worker, but the capitalist who exploits a large number of workers.’ (p. 928).

‘This expropriation is accomplished through the action of the immanent laws of capitalist production itself, through the centralization of capitals. One capitalist always strikes down many others...Along with the constant decrease in the number of capitalist magnates, who usurp and monopolize all the advantages of this process of transformation, the mass of misery, oppression, slavery, degradation and exploitation grows’ (p. 929).

‘The transformation of scattered private property resting on the personal labor of the individuals themselves into capitalist private property is naturally an incomparably more protracted, violent and difficult process than the transformation of capitalist private property, which in fact already rests on the carrying on of production by society, into social property.’ (p. 930).

Future reference: Grave-digger quote is on (p. 930).

Chapter 33: The Modern Theory of Colonization

Marx opens the chapter with the following:

“Political economy confuses on principle, two different kinds of private property, one of which rests on the labour of the producer himself, and the other on the exploitation of the labour of others. It forgets that the latter is not only the direct antithesis of the former, but grows on the former’s tomb and nowhere else.” (p. 931).

‘In Western Europe, the homeland of political economy, the process of primitive accumulation has more or less been accomplished. Here the capitalist regime has either directly subordinated to itself the whole of the nation’s production, or, where economic relations are less well developed, it has at least indirect control of those social layers which, although they belong to the antiquated mode of production, still continue to exist side by side with it in a state of decay. To this ready-made world of capital, the political economist applies the notions of law and of property inherited from a pre-capitalist world, with all the most anxious zeal and all the greater unctious, the more loudly the facts cry out in the face of this ideology.’ (p. 931).

“It is otherwise in the colonies. There the capitalist regime constantly comes up against the obstacle presented by the producer, who, as owner of his own conditions of labor, employs that labor to enrich himself instead of the capitalist. The contradiction between these two diametrically opposed economic systems has its practical manifestation here in the struggle between them. Where the capitalist has behind him the power of the mother country, he tries to use force to clear out of the way the modes of production and appropriation which rest on the personal labour of the independent producer.” (p. 931).

‘...the development of the social productivity of labor, co-operation, division of labor, application of machinery on a large scale, and so on, are impossible without the expropriation of the workers and the corresponding transformation of their means of production into capital.’ (p. 932).

‘It is the great merit of E.G. Wakefield to have discovered, not something new *about* the colonies, but, *in* the colonies, the truth about capitalist relations in the mother country. Just as the system of protection originally had the objective of manufacturing capitalists artificially in the mother country, so Wakefield’s theory of colonization, which England tried for a time to enforce by Act of Parliament, aims at manufacturing wage-laborers in the colonies. This is what he calls ‘systematic colonization’. (p. 932).

‘...Wakefield discovered that, in the colonies, property in money, means of subsistence, machines and other means of production does not as yet stamp a man as a capitalist if the essential complement to these things is missing: the wage-laborer, the other man, who is compelled to sell himself of his own free will. He discovered that capital is not a thing, but a social relation between persons which is mediated through things.’ (p. 932).

‘We know that the means of production and subsistence, while they remain the property of the immediate producer, are not capital. They only become capital under circumstances in which they serve at the same time as means of exploitation of, and domination over, the worker. But this, their capitalist soul, is so intimately wedded, in the mind of the political economist, to their material substance, that he christens them capital under all circumstances, even where they are its exact opposite.’ (p. 933).

‘So long, therefore, as the worker can accumulate for himself – and this he can do so long as he remains in possession of his means of production – capitalist accumulation and the capitalist mode of production are impossible.’ (p. 933).

Now Marx jokes about the ‘social contract’ theory of how labor and capital came into existence and he says it is highly unlikely that ‘the mass of mankind expropriated itself in honor of the accumulation of capital.’ (p. 934).

‘We have seen that the expropriation of the mass of the people from the soil forms the basis of the capitalist mode of production. The essence of a free colony, on the contrary, consists in this, that the bulk of the soil is still public property, and every settler on it can therefore turn part of it into his private property and his individual means of production, without preventing later settlers from performing the same operation.’ (p. 934).

‘In the old civilized countries the worker, although free, is by a law of nature dependent on the capitalist; in colonies this dependence must be created by artificial means’. (p. 937).

‘How then can the **anti-capitalist cancer** of the colonies be healed? If men were willing to turn the whole of the land from public into private property at one blow, this would certainly destroy the root of the evil, but it would also destroy – the colony. The trick is to kill two birds with one stone. Let the government set an artificial price on the virgin soil, a price independent of the law of supply and demand, a price that compels that immigrant to work a long time for wages before he can earn enough money to buy land and turn himself into an independent farmer. The fund resulting from the sale of land at a price relatively prohibitory for the wage-laborers, this fund of money extorted from the wages of labor by a violation of the sacred law of supply and demand, is to be applied by the government, in proportion to its growth, to the importation of paupers from Europe into the colonies, so as to keep the wage-labor market full for the capitalists. (p. 939).

Marx then discusses capitalism in America very briefly, and finishes his book with:

...the capitalist mode of production and accumulation, and therefore capitalist private property as well, have for their fundamental condition the annihilation of that private property which rests on the labor of the individual himself; in other words, the expropriation of the worker. (p. 940).

NOTES FROM:

Ellen Meiksins Wood (2002). *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View*. (London: Verso):

Marx, in his critique of ‘the so-called primitive accumulation’, diverged sharply from classical political economy and its commercialization model. The general principles spelled out in his critique of political economy – in particular, his insistence that wealth by itself is not ‘capital’, and that capital was a specific social relation – are here applied to the transition from feudalism to capitalism. It follows from these principles that the mere accumulation of wealth was not the decisive factor in the origin of capitalism. The ‘primitive accumulation’ of classical political economy is ‘so-called’ because capital, as Marx defines it, is a social relation and not just any kind of wealth or profit, and accumulation as such is not what brings about capitalism. While the accumulation of wealth was obviously a necessary condition of capitalism, it was far from being sufficient or decisive. What transformed wealth into capital was a transformation of social property relations. (p. 36)

The critical transformation of social property relations, in Marx's account, took place in the English countryside, with the expropriation of direct producers. In the new agrarian relations, landlords increasingly derived rents from the commercial profits of capitalist tenants, while many small producers were dispossessed and became wage laborers. Marx regards this rural transformation **as the real 'primitive accumulation'** not because it created a critical mass of wealth but because these social property relations generated new economic imperatives, especially the compulsions of competition, a systematic need to develop the productive forces, leading to new laws of motion such as the world had never seen before. (p. 37).

At the heart of this argument was Marx's insistence on the historical specificity of capitalism. This meant that capitalism had a historical beginning, in very specific historical conditions, and therefore it had a conceivable end. Capitalism was not the product of some inevitable natural process, nor was it the end of history. (p. 37).

As of late, there has been considerable debate over the nature, substance, and trajectory of capitalist development.

In this sense, primitive is a misnomer.

It is also evident here as always that it is in the interest of the dominant section of society to sanctify the existing situation as a law and to fix the limits given by custom and tradition as legal ones. Even ignoring other factors, this happens automatically as soon as the constant reproduction of the basis of the existing situation, the relationship underlying it, assumes a regular and ordered form in the course of time; and this regulation and order is itself an indispensable moment of any mode of production that is to become solidly established and free from mere accident or caprice. It can attain this form in stagnant conditions of both the production process and the social relations corresponding to it, simply by reproducing itself repeatedly. Once this process has continued for a certain length of time, it is reinforced as usage and tradition and finally sanctified as an explicit law. (Marx p. 929 Capital vol III).

Modalities of Expropriation identified by Marx:

1. The commodification and privatization of land and the forceful expulsion of peasant populations.
2. Conversion of various forms of property rights – common, collective, state, etc. – into exclusive private property rights.
3. Suppression of rights to the commons.
4. Commodification of labor power and the suppression of alternative indigenous, forms of production and consumption.
5. Colonial, neo-colonial and imperial processes of appropriation of assets, including natural resources.
6. Monetization of exchange and taxation, particularly of land.
7. Slave trade and *abolition of slavery*.
8. Usury.
9. The national debt.
10. Credit system.
11. *Suppression of wages by the state (p. 900).
12. *Large scale industry (p. 912).

“The state, with its monopoly of violence and definitions of legality, plays a crucial role in both backing and promoting these processes and there is considerable evidence, which Marx suggests and Braudel confirms, that the transition to capitalist development was vitally contingent upon the stance of the state...(Harvey, 2003 p. 74).