

Disaggregating primitive accumulation

Robert Nichols

For nearly 150 years now, critical theorists of various stripes have attempted to explicate, correct and complement Marx's discussion of the 'so-called' primitive accumulation of capital provided in Part Eight of the first volume of *Capital*.¹ This is perhaps especially true of Marxism in the English-speaking world. Whereas French and German traditions have tended to focus more on the formal categories of *Capital*, anglophone debates have attended more closely to Marx's historical-descriptive account, perhaps due to the privileged role that England plays in the historical drama staging the bourgeois revolt against feudalism, the early emergence of capitalist relations and subsequent industrial revolution. The enclosures of the English commons and transformation of the rural peasantry into an industrial workforce serve, after all, as the primary empirical referents from which Marx derives his conceptual tools. From Paul Sweezy and Maurice Dobb in the 1950s, to Christopher Hill, C.B. Macpherson and E.P. Thompson in the 1960s, to Perry Anderson and Robert Brenner in the 1970s, these 'transition debates' have focused on the accuracy and adequacy of Marx's history of early modern England.²

Across a variety of interpretative traditions, a major point of contention with regard to primitive accumulation has been the sense given in *Capital* that it is best thought of as a *historical stage* eventually supplanted by the general law of capitalist accumulation – what we can call the 'stadial interpretation'. One important reason why this has been contentious is that it implies a corresponding stadial succession in the *forms of violence* engendered by capitalism.

There are many passages in *Capital* in which Marx gives one the impression that we ought to interpret primitive accumulation as a historical stage, overtaken and superseded by the true, mature, general law of accumulation once a full and complete capitalist system is in place. As mentioned above, Marx's primary empirical case of primitive accumulation is the series of 'enclosures of the commons' that

took place in England and Scotland, primarily in the seventeenth century. While acknowledging some variation in the historical experience of different countries and regions, Marx designates this English version the 'classic form' and certainly suggests that, by his own time, this process had ended. He expressly relegates it to the 'pre-history of capital'.³

In a certain sense, Marx's own argument centrally depends on the interpretation of primitive accumulation as a historically completed stage. His argument requires this because of the role it plays in the account of the general law of accumulation under the fully developed form of the capital relation. Marx argues that the proper functioning of the capital relation is predicated upon systematic exploitation – intrinsic to capitalist production – rather than a side effect or a distortion. But if it is so systematic and widespread, then why does it require such elaborate unmasking by Marx in the first place? Why can't the people who labour under this system of exploitation recognize it as such?

To explain this obfuscation, we need an account of something like ideology or hegemony. Marx has argued that one of the distinctive features of capitalism as a system of exploitation is that it operates through the nominal freedom of the exploited. Labourers 'freely' contract into their own exploitation, often experiencing this as an actualization of choice and free will, in part because they lack an analysis of how this context of choice was established in the first place, or a vision of how it might be replaced by another. Capitalism is 'naturalized' when one accepts only the range of possibilities within immediate view without recognizing the background structuring conditions of this range as the product of an arbitrary and historically contingent set of circumstances. But for this ideological normalization to be plausible, Marx must assert not only that mature capitalism does not require unconcealed 'extra-economic' violence, but also that the period when such violence was required has faded from

immediate consciousness. Although capitalism's pre-history is dripping in blood, once the fundamental capital relation is established, extra-economic force is thought to fade away. It is replaced by the 'silent compulsion of economic relations [*der stumme Zwang der ökonomischen Verhältnisse*]' which 'sets the seal on the domination of the capitalist over the worker. Direct extra-economic force [*außerökonomische, unmittelbare Gewalt*] is still of course used, but only in exceptional cases.⁴ Even the immediate consciousness of the previous period of violence has been largely erased. Hence, for instance, Marx's insistence that, by 'the nineteenth century, the very memory of the connection between the agricultural labourer and communal property had, of course, vanished'.⁵ This is why the very idea of a primitive or 'originary' accumulation seems to necessitate a stadial interpretation: a stadial account explains our 'forgetting' of capitalism's birth in blood and fire.

It is also perhaps clearer now why the stadial interpretation has been so controversial and vexing. Critics have raised objections not only to the historical periodization, but also to the very idea that the overt, extra-economic violence required by capitalism is surpassed and transformed into a period of 'silent compulsion' through exploitation. Peter Kropotkin, for one, roundly criticized Marx's reliance upon an 'erroneous division between the *primary* accumulation of capital and its present-day formation'.⁶ For Kropotkin and his anarchist-collectivist movement, the framing of primitive accumulation as a historical epoch was more than a side concern; it spoke to the central question of the relationship between capitalism and the state form. Rejecting the 'silent compulsion' thesis, Kropotkin argued that capitalism required the use of continuous, unmediated and unmasked violence to maintain its operation. As a result, he also rejected any attempt at working within bourgeois capitalist political systems, favouring direct action and the immediate creation of non-capitalist spaces of work and life (a position that has split anarchists and Marxists from the First International to the present).⁷

In a different way, this was also central to Rosa Luxemburg's analysis. In *The Accumulation of Capital*, Luxemburg famously reworked the concept of primitive accumulation into a continuous and constitutive feature of capitalist expansion. In her rendering, primitive accumulation is transposed from Marx's 'pre-history' of capital to a central explanatory concept in the apprehension of imperial expansion. As she put it,

The existence and development of capitalism requires an environment of non-capitalist forms of production... Capitalism needs non-capitalist social strata as a market for its surplus value, as a source of supply for its means of production and as a reservoir of labour power for its wage system... Capitalism must therefore always and everywhere fight a battle of annihilation against every historical form of natural economy that it encounters.⁸

So for Luxemburg, not only does overt, political violence persist, it takes on 'two faces'. Within Europe 'force assumed revolutionary forms in the fight against feudalism', whereas outside Europe this force 'assumes the forms of colonial policy'.⁹ The importance of Luxemburg's innovation therefore consists in her ability to draw a variety of distinct manifestations of political-economic transformation, upheaval and violence into a single analytic frame – the constitutionally expanding field of *imperial capitalism*. At least at this general level, this basic insight has endured and found resonances with a wide range of subsequent thinkers.¹⁰

In more recent times, debates within feminist and postcolonial theory have revived this question. The intertwining of empire, primitive accumulation and 'extra-economic violence' has unsurprisingly played a central role in the emergence of an entire tradition of postcolonial Marxism, particularly in India. Ranajit's Guha's landmark *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983) set the tone for these debates. As the title of his subsequent work, *Dominance Without Hegemony* (1998), makes all the more explicit, Guha (and, along with him, much of the Subaltern Studies movement) took issue with the occlusion of imperial domination in favour of the Western Marxist experience of hegemony. They argued that, contrary to the traditional Marxist (but especially neo-Gramscian) account, the most advanced, 'mature' accumulation of capital coexisted alongside and necessarily required the kind of overt state violence Marx had supposedly relegated to its 'pre-history'. There was no historical transition from extra-economic violence to silent compulsion, only a geographical displacement of the former to the imperial periphery.¹¹

Silvia Federici's *The Caliban and the Witch* is another coruscating appropriation of the concept of primitive accumulation. Federici delves into the dense archive of state and capital formation from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century in order to correct Marx's blindness towards gender as a central axis of social organization and control, demonstrating

how violence against women is congenital to capitalism's formulation. Reconstructing the early history of capitalism from the standpoint of women as a social and political class, while always subtended by a racial and imperial horizon, Federici entirely reworks primitive accumulation as a category of analysis. Her conclusion confirms that of Kropotkin, Luxemburg, Guha et al.:

A return of the most violent aspects of primitive accumulation has accompanied every phase of capitalist globalization, including the present one, demonstrating that the continuous expulsion of farmers from the land, war and plunder on a world scale, and the degradation of women are necessary conditions for the existence of capitalism in all times.¹²

The North American indigenous political theorist Glen Coulthard has also recently engaged in a critical reconstruction of primitive accumulation expressly designed to shift the focus towards the colonial relation. In his work, Coulthard seeks to strip Marx's original formulation of its 'Eurocentric feature[s]' by '*contextually shifting* our investigation from an emphasis on the *capital relation* to the *colonial relation*'.¹³ In this contextual shift, Coulthard draws resources from Marx's own writings, noting that after the collapse of the Paris Commune in 1871, Marx began to engage in more serious empirical and historical investigations of a variety of non-Western societies. The so-called ethnographic notebooks (1879–82) are filled with such studies, including lengthy treatment of communal property and land tenure. These writings, when combined with the revisions that Marx made to the 1872–75 French edition of *Capital*, and his periodic comments on the Russian *mir* or communal village form, present us with a significantly altered picture.¹⁴ Marx searches here for an alternative to the relatively unilinear account of historical development given in his earlier works, suggesting that capitalist development could take a variety of different paths, implying at least the possibility of alternative modes of overcoming capitalism and implementing socialist systems of social organization. This rethinking rebounded back upon Marx's own understanding of primitive accumulation. Perhaps most famously, in an 1877 letter to Nikolay Mikhaylovsky, Marx protested that the chapter on primitive accumulation should not be read as a 'historico-philosophical theory of the general course imposed on all peoples', but rather a historical examination of the 'path by which, in *Western Europe*, the capitalist economic order emerged from the womb of the feudal economic order'.¹⁵

If revisionist accounts of primitive accumulation have slowly gathered steam over the past 150 years, then, they have exploded in the past decade or so, particularly in the field of critical geography. However, this explosion has also caused a certain conceptual shattering, throwing forth a range of ambiguously related companion concepts such as 'accumulation by displacement', 'dispossession by displacement', 'accumulation by encroachment', and 'accumulation by denial'.¹⁶ Perhaps most influentially, David Harvey speaks of 'accumulation by dispossession'. While offered as a synonym for primitive accumulation, in Harvey's rendering 'accumulation by dispossession' is essentially a stand-in for privatization: 'the transfer of productive public assets from the state to private companies', especially as a result of the supposed over-accumulation of capital in neoliberal times.¹⁷ The category is thus shorn from any connection to the transition debates or, indeed, from any particular connection to land.

In the now rather fragmented conceptual field responding to Harvey, three broad approaches appear. The first defines primitive accumulation in terms of the processes by which the 'outside' of capital comes to be incorporated within it. It is thus an essentially spatial framework, but one that often oscillates between the metaphors of 'frontiers' and 'enclosures'. Whereas the former denotes the outside boundary of capital, and is inescapably tied to colonial imaginaries, the latter invokes more a sense of encirclement and physical (if not also metaphorical) gating, fencing and partition.¹⁸ A second framework emphasizes 'extra-economic means' as the definitive feature. For instance, Michael Levein defines 'accumulation by dispossession' as 'the use of extra-economic coercion to expropriate means of production, subsistence or common social wealth for capital accumulation'.¹⁹ As this formulation highlights, the linking of primitive accumulation to 'extra-economic means' demands consideration of the politics/economics distinction and (unlike the first framework) does not necessarily pertain to the expansion of capital into new societies and spaces, but may take place entirely 'within' capital's existing sphere of influence. Finally, a third framework emphasizes the *object* of appropriation. This is most evident in the large literature that defines primitive accumulation in terms of 'land grabbing'.²⁰ It is this emphasis on land – and its relation to the other elements of primitive accumulation – that I intend to explore here. For the moment at least, we can say that while the above elements may hang together in some

specific formulations (for example, extra-economic land acquisition on the frontier of capital), they need not do so. Considerable disagreement persists therefore when it comes to identifying which element is decisive in demarcating primitive accumulation as a distinct category of analysis.

Structure or stage?

Among the myriad complexities of these debates, two matters stand out most prominently: (1) is primitive accumulation best thought of as a historical stage of capitalist development or as a distinct modality of its ongoing operation? (2) does the supposed 'silent compulsion' characteristic of capitalist exploitation constitutionally depend upon the continual injection of 'extra-economic' violence? The first is about the relation between the general law of accumulation and primitive accumulation; the second about the forms of violence they imply. From Marx's own later writings, through to Luxembour, Guha, Federici, Coulthard, and much (but not all) of the critical geography framework, this has generally been resolved by shifting the temporal framework provided in *Capital* to a spatial one: we are no longer operating with a distinction between mature capital and its prehistory, but with a distinction between core and periphery, colonizer and the colonized.

On the one hand, it seems intuitively correct to suggest that the extra-economic violence engendered by capitalism has not been superseded historically by the emergence of the supposedly more 'mature' features of the general law of accumulation – that is, the silent compulsion of exploitation. Capitalism's entanglement in expansionist, imperial war is too widespread, systematic and ongoing to be relegated to a prehistory. On the other hand, however, characterization of this dimension of capitalist expansion and reproduction as 'primitive accumulation' places considerable strain upon the coherence of that term. Specifically, such reformulations drive a wedge between the *conceptual-analytic* and *empirical-descriptive* functions of the concept.²¹

Tensions between these two functions are, of course, already latent within Marx's original formulation. Marx's historical description of the actual processes of capital formation in Western Europe serves a conceptual-analytic function as a paradigmatic or 'classic form'. It has thus provided the basis for the general theory or formal model that, while originally rooted in the specific historical experiences of early modern England, now exceeds and transcends this particular case. In this second, formal register, other

cases can be evaluated as better or worse approximations of the ideal. Since Marx expressly analogizes between the prehistory of European capital and the non-European, non-capitalist world existing in contemporaneous time with his own theoretical formulations in *Capital* (the colonial periphery of the mid-nineteenth century), a certain historicist tendency is disclosed, providing fodder to enable important postcolonial criticisms to emerge subsequently.²²

Ironically, reformulations of Marx's original thesis along these lines have tended to compound, rather than resolve, such tensions. By expressly grouping the diversity of extra-economic violence manifest at the peripheries of capitalism under the general heading of primitive accumulation, such work has only exaggerated and expanded the historicist tendency already implicit in *Capital*. For if the extra-economic violence of the imperial peripheries is an instantiation of primitive accumulation, then we should expect its empirical content to conform to the 'classic case' of seventeenth-century England. This requires a large generalization across space and time, threatening to empty the term of its original content. As Ulas Ince warns: in a drive to expand the descriptive extension of primitive accumulation (what it covers), its conceptual intension (what it means) has become less precise and clear.²³

In an effort to avoid a theory of primitive accumulation that smacks too much of the stages of development these characteristic of Eurocentric nineteenth-century philosophical anthropology, subsequent commentators have elided the fact that at least in one important respect the developments that took place in Western Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were in fact qualitatively unique. Specifically, primitive accumulation in Western Europe took place in a global context in which no other capitalist societies already existed. Whatever analogies between capital formation in Europe and non-European societies obtain, this fact attests to a singular event that could never again take place. All other, subsequent experiences with primitive accumulation were dissimilar from Marx's 'classic case' in this specific respect at least. And this had enormous implications for the shape, speed and character of capitalist development in all other locales, because in all other places it was structurally affected by already-existing capitalism in Western Europe. Put differently, while the original framework attempts to explain the strange alchemy of capital's emergence out of non-capital, subsequent focus shifts to the subsumption of non-capital by already-existing

capital. This is why colonial policy of the nineteenth or twentieth century is *not* analogous to primitive accumulation in seventeenth-century England. The spatial expansion of capital through empire does not, in fact, represent a return to capitalism's origins, so much as a succession of qualitatively unique spatio-temporal waves, simultaneously linking core and periphery.

Consequently, I submit that primitive accumulation cannot be coherently extended to define a feature or dimension of contemporary capitalism without considerable reconstruction of its conceptual intension. In order to preserve the insight with regard to the persistence of extra-economic violence, but avoid the problems of an overly generalized extension of the concept, what is required is, first, a *disaggregation* of the component elements of primitive accumulation in favour of an analysis that contemplates alternative possible relations between these elements. Marx largely treats the four elements of primitive accumulation as one modular package: he explicates the violence of dispossession as a means of explaining the other elements of proletarianization, market formation, and the separation of agriculture and industry. Subsequent debates have largely taken on this model, treating the four elements as though necessarily interconnected, focusing debate on whether their initial formation (and the overt violence required for their emergence) has been superseded or remains alive today. This leads one to the (mistaken) expectation that all cases of primitive accumulation should express this fourfold structure. Thus, my first postulate here is that by treating primitive accumulation as a modular package of interrelated processes the category becomes overdetermined by the specific historical form originally given by Marx.

My second basic postulate is that rather than adopting a general expansion of the category of primitive accumulation, we are better served by reworking the notion of *Enteignung* originally formulated therein. *Enteignung* – variously translated as ‘dispossession’ or ‘expropriation’ – is a narrower and more precise term of art than primitive accumulation. More to the point, it comes closer to grasping the original intent of the revisionist theories of primitive accumulation: naming a form of violence distinct from the silent compulsion of exploitation. Rather than working with a distinction between general and primitive accumulation, then, I commend working with a distinction between exploitation and dispossession (where the latter is used in a more specific sense than simply as a synonym for primitive accumulation

itself). By disaggregating primitive accumulation, we allow for the possibility of relating exploitation and dispossession in a variety of ways, rather than assuming they hang together in the manner envisioned by Marx's ‘classic form’.

Going into clearing

At the most general level, Marx employs the concept of dispossession to denote the process by which ‘immediate producers’ are separated from direct access to the means of production and/or subsistence. Marx's most basic and frequent example of this is the separation of peasant agricultural producers from direct access to publicly held land, or ‘commons’. Through his use of the term ‘dispossession’, Marx thereby teaches us something about his views on land, nature and locality or territorial rootedness. Marx uses a variety of formulations to elaborate upon the idea, but one influential phrasing is that dispossession entails the ‘theft of land’. *Capital* is replete with words like *Raub* (robbery) and *Diebstahl* (theft) as instantiations of *Enteignung* or *Expropriation*.²⁴ Marx also occasionally uses these terms more or less interchangeably with *Aneignung*, which translators have frequently rendered as ‘usurpation’, although ‘appropriation’ is probably more helpful, since it retains the direct link to expropriation, proprietary and indeed property – although it also has some positive usages in Marx, especially in the early writings.

While evocative (and thus popular in contemporary debates),²⁵ the phrase ‘theft of land’ is indeterminate in a variety of ways. Both words need unpacking. The former term seems to imply a normative basis for the critique (i.e. denoting a kind of offence or violence), while the latter suggests its natural object. But what exactly is meant by *theft* here and in what sense can it pertain to *land*? Is this meant only as a specific example, relevant to seventeenth-century enclosures and/or nineteenth-century colonialism, or is it the necessary and fundamental expression of a general dispossessive logic in capitalist development across time and space? And what of the conjunction joining them? Is the key element theft, with a variable object, or is land the decisive element, subject to various kinds of appropriations? We must press Marx on both terms.

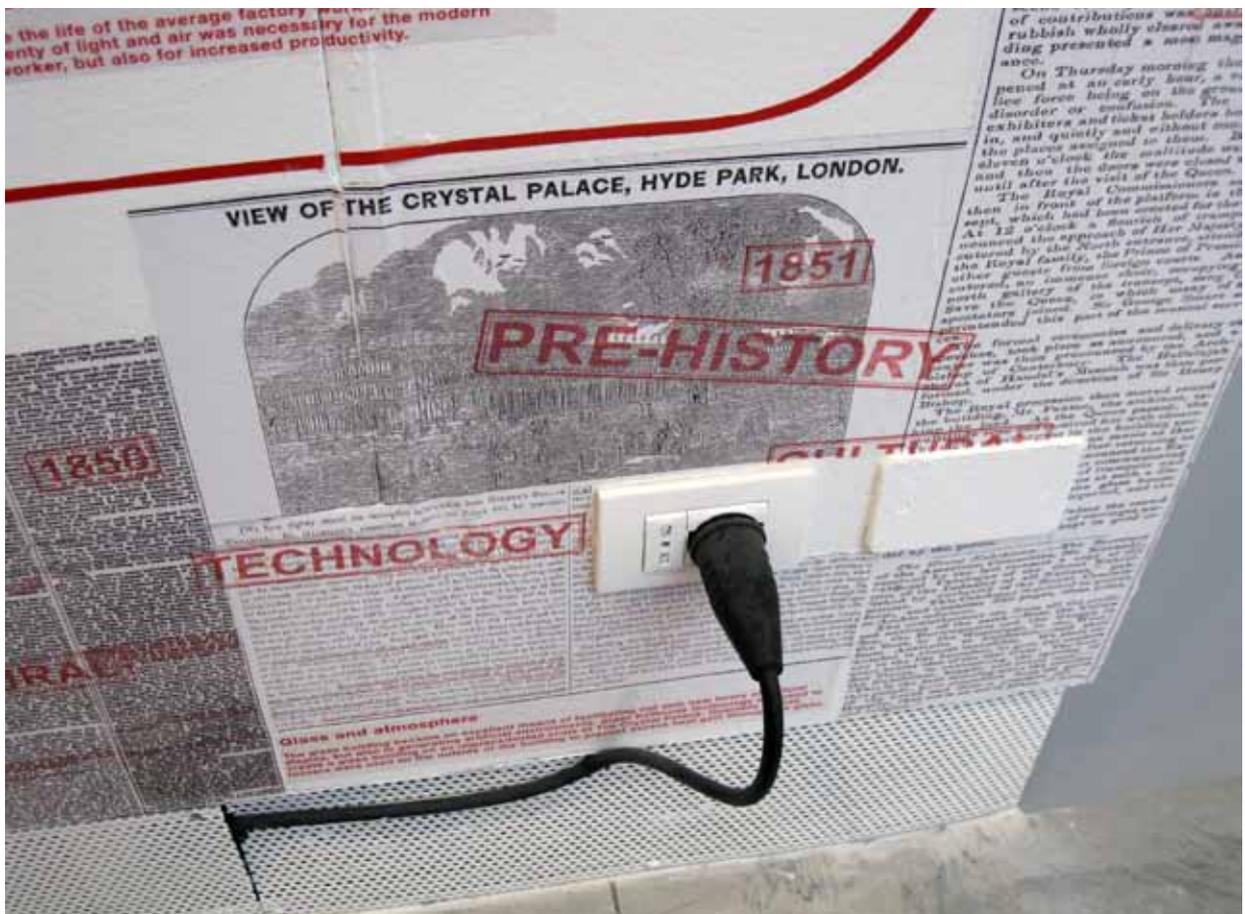
In the ordinary sense of the term, theft is an event, most often taking place between two individuals. By contrast, when Marx is providing a more systematic explication of dispossession, he clearly intends a continual process that ought to be analysed from the standpoint of class-formation, rather than

individual agents taken in isolation. Although he does occasionally fall into speaking of individual acts of violence (*individuelle Gewalttat*), the more proper designation continues to reference a 'process of separating' (*Scheidungsprozeß*). What exactly is being separated from whom may still remain unclear, but the emphasis on a process intrinsic to the original formation of the capital relation seems to transcend the ordinary sense of theft or robbery.

There is, however, another sense in which 'theft of land' is unhelpful for getting at the specificity of dispossession in the general theory of primitive accumulation. If we persist in speaking of the theft of land, we may be lulled into thinking of 'land' here in a narrow sense – that is, as one object of possession among others. Marx repeatedly uses the phrase *Grund und Boden* when speaking of the object of *Enteignung*; 'grounds and lands' are that from which we are dispossessed. But this is clearly shorthand for a more expansive sense of those terms. In fact, land stands in here for the foundational relationship to the original means of production as provided by the earth itself. There is a great deal that could be unpacked here, including Marx's conception of a 'social metabolism' between humanity and the natural world, which crops up periodically in *Capital*.

We do not need a full analysis of this relationship, however, in order to observe that 'land' here is not another ordinary object of possession. When Marx speaks of land in the context of dispossession, he does not mean it as a good, but as the condition of possibility for the *production* of goods and, ultimately, for the reproduction of social life itself. It comprises a key element in what Rosa Luxemburg called the 'natural economy'.²⁶

This leads to a third and final sense in which 'theft of land' is unhelpful. In the ordinary sense of the term, theft denotes the immoral and/or unlawful transfer of property from one person to another: for example, I take your bike from you. In this common use of the term, goods or commodities move from one person to another. In a manner of speaking, we might say that the people remain static, while the objects themselves circulate. Although the phrase 'theft of land' helpfully points to some ways in which *Enteignung* is like robbery in the ordinary sense, it can conceal the distinctiveness of the basic relationship to the earth referenced here. For if I 'steal' your land I don't literally move it from your home to mine. Rather, I move *you*. Whenever Marx speaks of the theft of land as a key instantiation of dispossession, he flags for us the way in which land designates



one key distinctive aspect of the interactive relationship between humans and the non-human natural environment – namely, its *spatiality* and/or *territorial specificity*.

To speak of dispossession as an element foundational to the production and reproduction of the capital relation is, therefore, to indicate something of the ways in which capitalism disrupts or disturbs our orientation in space, our place-based relations. This basic point has important implications for any theoretical analysis of the specificity of political struggles mediated primarily through relationships to land, belying any simple reduction to questions of property and theft. To give but one quick example, a ‘right of return’ in the context of struggles over land entails not a return of the property to the original owner, but a return of the owner to her original home. So if the primary historical expression of *Enteignung* is the dispossession of immediate producers from their basic relationship to land, then it necessarily entails the forced movement of people; it implies dislocation. While theft in the ordinary sense can be violent, it does not necessarily denote this geospatial reorganization of populations in the way that dispossession from land seems to require. It is perhaps in recognition of this fact that Marx fairly consistently employs the pairing ‘expropriation and expulsion’ (*Enteignung und Verjagung*) in the later chapters of *Capital* (30–33). In general, then, we can at least provisionally see that to speak of dispossession is to entangle ourselves in questions far larger than the simple theft of objects.

Although Marx provides indispensable resources for analysing the distinctiveness of dispossession as a form of violence, as we have already noted above, he is not interested in expropriation for its own sake. Instead, dispossession is analysed in *Capital* instrumentally, as a means of explaining proletarianization. This is apparent even in his analysis of the violent expulsion and ‘clearing process’ implied by dispossession. In his account of the transformation of the Scottish highlands, for instance, Marx emphasizes that ‘the last great process of dispossession of the agricultural population from the soil’ is ‘the so-called “clearing of estates”, i.e., the sweeping of human beings off them. All the English methods hitherto considered culminated in “clearing”’.²⁷ Marx even expressly links this clearing process to environmental destruction and colonial expansion.²⁸ However, he proceeds to interpret this process of dispossession as causally linked to the other component elements of primitive accumulation, especially

proletarianization. Marx is quite clear that the purpose of this dispossession process is precisely to drive landed peasantry into disciplinary waged-labour relations:

The intermittent but constantly renewed *expropriation and expulsion* [*Enteignung und Verjagung*] of the agricultural population supplied the urban industries, as we have seen, with a mass of proletarians... The thinning-out of the independent self-supporting peasants *corresponded directly with the concentration of the industrial proletariat*.²⁹

In other words, Marx views the violence of dispossession in light of the other constitutive elements of primitive accumulation, namely proletarianization, market formation and urbanization. *Enteignung und Verjagung* emerge as key concepts for him in these moments, but only instrumentally as the means of explaining proletarianization. The enclosures of the commons and the clearing of the land are undertaken *in such a way* as to generate an initial market in labour.

This formulation is, however, vulnerable to the same criticisms Marx lodged against the traditional political economists. Proletarianization cannot be the motivational impetus behind the enclosure of the commons, since this would, again, presume the context it is meant to explain. Marx comes close to committing this error at times because he does not always clearly differentiate between functional and explanatory accounts. While the enclosures of the commons may have significant explanatory power when it comes to documenting the formation of an urbanized class of waged labours, it is an altogether different matter to claim this as its function. On Marx’s own terms, it cannot be the function of dispossession to generate a proletariat, at least not in the original case. We must qualify with ‘in the original case’ here, because it *is* possible to envision a non-tautological functionalist account of dispossession relative to proletarianization *after* the original formation of a capitalist society. From that point on, the demand for new labour may in fact be a significant factor in subsequent enclosures and dispossessions.

To clarify the distinction, consider two archetypal agents of dispossession in *Capital*: the Duchess of Sutherland and E.G. Wakefield. Marx pillories the first for her appropriation of 794,000 acres of land and subsequent expulsion of the Scottish clans who had lived on them ‘from time immemorial’.³⁰ However violent this process of dispossession was, it was not undertaken *in order* to produce a class of vulnerable waged proletarians, even if this was the

effect. E.G. Wakefield is an entirely different case, however. The English colonial advocate did expressly and intentionally work to dispossess both indigenous peoples and independent agrarian settler-producers *in order to* generate and maintain a pool of vulnerable waged labourers in the colony of New South Wales, and could do so precisely because previous iterations of dispossession had *already* generated a proletariat.³¹ Although both processes of dispossession are related to proletarianization in some way, they are also importantly different in a manner that alters the overarching conceptualization of primitive accumulation. In the move from Sutherland to Wakefield, we also move from an explanatory account of the dispossession–proletarianization connection to a functionalist one.

My postulate, then, is that the causal linkage between dispossession and exploitation in Marx's original formulation is underdetermined. It is not the case that dispossession is always explicable in terms of its function relative to proletarianization, a matter that is obscured by the modular conception of primitive accumulation in both its original and its revisionist forms. It is, however, possible to recast dispossession as a distinct category of violent transformation independent of the processes of proletarianization and market formation. To do so, however, requires relating labour to land.

The dialectic of labour and land

As mentioned earlier, the phrase *Grund und Boden* appears periodically throughout *Capital*, but it is a phrase that stands in need of some unpacking. On the one hand, as we have already seen, terms like 'land', 'ground', 'earth' and 'soil' are used in their ordinary-language senses to refer to various material objects in the simple sense. It is in this sense that Marx and later thinkers speak from time to time of the 'theft of land'. Land here appears to be little more than another kind of commodity, reworked by capitalism, and subject to the same forces we would expect to find in the struggle over any other resource.³² In other moments, however, Marx is more careful – expressly working to demonstrate how it is that land is not, in fact, simply another object of production and circulation. In those moments when Marx speaks to the distinctiveness of land, he typically does so in a voice more reminiscent of his earlier, so-called anthropological writings. In these passages, the land appears as a category derived from a classical Hegelian idiom of 'man and nature'. In short, *land* is dialectically related to the category of

labour. Consider the formal definition of labour in Chapter 7 of *Capital*, Volume 1:

Labour is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature. He confronts the materials of nature as a force of nature.

Labour in this precise sense is said to be 'an exclusively human characteristic' because 'man not only effects a change of form in the materials of nature; he also realizes [*verwirklicht*] his own purpose in those materials'.³³ This definition is clearly rooted in a Hegelian framework, with its emphasis on the external objectification of the will:

During the labour process, the worker's labour constantly undergoes a transformation, from the form of unrest [*Unruhe*] into that of being [*Sein*], from the form of motion [*Bewegung*] into that of objectivity [*Gegenständlichkeit*].³⁴

From this general definition, Marx proceeds to disarticulate the labour process into three component parts: (1) purposeful activity, (2) the object on which that work is performed, and (3) the instruments of that work.³⁵ We are left, then, with a labour process comprising *activity*, *object* and *instrument*.

It is in the context of this discussion of labour that we find a more formal and conceptually precise definition of land. In the formal sense given by Volume 1 of *Capital*, land is not merely another product of labour (a commodity), but is rather a special kind of *instrument* or *medium* of labour. In the tripartite division above, it is number 3, not 2. Marx writes:

An instrument of labour is a thing, or a complex of things, which the worker interposes between himself and the object of his labour and which serves as a conductor, directing his activity onto that object... Leaving out of consideration such ready-made means of subsistence as fruits, in gathering which a man's bodily organs alone serve as the instruments of his labour, the object the worker directly takes possession of is not the object of labour but its instrument. Thus nature becomes one of the organs of his activity, which he annexes to his own bodily organs, adding stature to himself in spite of the Bible. As the earth is his original larder, so too it is his original tool house. It supplies him, for instance, with stones for throwing, grinding, pressing, cutting, etc. *The earth itself is an instrument of labour...*³⁶

So, rather than relating land back to other commodities, in this formulation it is clearly seen as a

component of the broader category of 'nature'. It is part of 'the earth itself'. In some cases, it seems that the term 'land' is being used to designate that element of nature yet to be transformed directly by human labouring activity. In these moments, land is deployed paradoxically as both an *instrument of labour* and as that which stands *outside of labour*. Land is, 'economically speaking, all the objects of labour furnished by nature *without human intervention*'.³⁷

Such apparent contradictions can only be resolved by grasping them dialectically – that is, by relating them to the more general category of nature. It would take us too far from our objectives here to provide an explication of the concept of nature in Marx, but it is nevertheless important to note that the status of the land as both inside and outside of the labour process reflects Marx's broader conceptualization of nature as something 'outside' of humanity, or at least non-identical with it (i.e. that which humanity confronts and transforms) and, at the same time, the totality of all that exists (thereby encompassing humanity as well). Marx's innovation was in recasting the moment of encounter with nature from a contest with an unhistorical, homogenous substratum to an already historically mediated element of human practice. Nature is not eternally selfsame, but is itself the product of previous generations of human praxis. As a result, it has a necessarily temporal and historical character.³⁸

Marx's use of the term 'land' is therefore clearly intended to link labour and nature. However, it is not synonymous with either of these. For land in its specificity designates a relationship to *place*. The metabolic interaction of humans and nature is rooted in and mediated through particular locales, and this territorial specificity gives form to a society's labour process. This is reflected in the simple observation that to forcibly relocate an entire human community to some other place is to fundamentally and irrevocably transform it (moreover, most people view their homelands as non-fungible, to the point that adequate compensation cannot, even in principle, be given for their irredeemable loss or destruction). So, just as we can affirm the Hegelian-Marxist point that human communities do not interact with nature in a historical vacuum, we must add that neither do they encounter it in a *spatial* one. Land, then, is best grasped here as an intermediary concept – situated between labour and nature, between activity and object – designating the spatial and territorial specificity of this mediation. Importantly, while this spatiality can be shaped and reworked by human

praxis, it is not reducible to that activity. The land mediates labouring activity through a set of spatial relations which are not themselves the product of human will, but rather a set of worldly circumstances in which we find ourselves. This is why it functions as a mediator; it retains something of the natural world. (This is the reason, for instance, Karl Polanyi insisted land was really only a 'fictitious commodity'.³⁹) While land can clearly be commodified in certain respects (bought, sold, traded, rented, stolen, etc.), it nevertheless must also be grasped in its distinctiveness if we are to understand the nature of dispossession.

It is true of course that Marx's primary understanding of dispossession as the 'theft of land' is indebted to a specific historical context in which land acquisition played a determinate role in the shape and structure of capitalist development. A suitably reconstructed account reveals, however, that Marx's focus on land is the particular expression of a generalizable insight, namely that dispossession entails the appropriation of, and consolidated class monopoly in, the mediated 'metabolic interaction' of humanity and the productive resources of the earth. It is thus not reducible to primitive accumulation writ large, nor to abstracted conceptions of privatization, or the 'release of public assets'.

In reformulated accounts of dispossession, Marxist thinkers frequently pass over the original emphasis on land and instead adopt a highly abstract formulation: the appropriation of the means of production.⁴⁰ This general phrase appears to avoid the problems of overly specifying a *particular* historical configuration of the forces of production. The 'means of production' are highly variable in content, containing almost anything depending upon the historical and socio-logical specifics. They can include everything from factory equipment and tools, to computers and other electronic devices. However, all of those objects are themselves the *products* of previous cycles of labour. They may function as the means of production in specific contexts, but their unequal distribution is not itself necessarily the function of a dispossessive logic. Rather, inequality in such goods can be more easily explained as the fruits of exploitation. In order for dispossession to be a distinctive category of capitalist violence (e.g. not reducible to exploitation), we must be clear in our use of the abstract formulation. The unequal access here must, in other words, ultimately refer to some element contained within the concept of 'means of production' that is not reducible to the product of labour itself. As intimated above, this irreducible element is the contribution of the productive

powers of the natural world. If we follow Marx's logic back through the various manifestations of the means of production, we arrive at the insight that the 'separation process' at the heart of dispossession is a separation of the bulk of humanity from the productive power of nature. As he put it in the *Grundrisse*, while 'all production is appropriation of nature on the part of an individual within and through a specific form of society', the specific and necessary component of capitalist production is the

(1) *Dissolution* of the relation to the earth – land and soil – as natural condition for production – to which [the worker] relates as to his own inorganic being; the workshop of his forces, and the domain of his will... [and] (2) *Dissolution of the relations* in which he appears as *proprietor of the instrument*.⁴¹

'Land' is the name given to this irreducible element in *Capital* because it was the most visible and concrete manifestation of this dual-sided dissolution/appropriation in the specific immediate contexts that most shaped Marx's thought. This can be obscured by the fact that we also speak of land as the means of production for one particular kind of labouring activity, namely agricultural. Hence possible confusion arises from the fact that the term is used both as *one example* of the means of production (e.g. on a par with tools) *and* as the original fount of all other, secondary means of production. A properly reconstructed account must preserve the original insight of the latter while, at the same time, transcending the limitations of the former. In so doing, we must move beyond the particular expression given in the nineteenth-century portrait of land as bound distinctly to agricultural production, but also the notion that its appropriation is 'originary' in a temporal sense – that is, as an event in time or a stage of development. What follows from this is that dispossession comes to name a distinct logic of capitalist development grounded in the appropriation and monopolization of the productive powers of the natural world in a manner that orders (but does not directly determine) social pathologies related to dislocation, class stratification and/or exploitation, while simultaneously converting the planet into a homogeneous and universal means of production. Moreover, since we have freed this formulation from the specific historical configuration envisioned by the original analysis of primitive accumulation, we can properly view it as a process that is constitutive and contemporary.

Notes

This article is a revised version of a paper given at the 'Powers and Limits of Property' workshop, organised by the Centre for Philosophy and Critical Thought, Goldsmiths, University of London, 11 June 2015. The author thanks the participants there (especially Brenna Bhandar, Stella Sandford, and Alberto Toscano), the research colloquium on Social Philosophy at the Humboldt Universität zu Berlin (especially Rahel Jaeggi, Eva von Redecker, and Bastian Ronge), and Glen Coulthard, Ulas Ince, Will Roberts.

1. One irony of this debate has been the extent to which primitive accumulation is now commonly spoken of as a Marxist concept, when it derives from Adam Smith. Ambiguities and misreadings are compounded through multiple translations. In *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith spoke of an 'accumulation of stock' that must be 'previous to the division of labour'. When Marx translated this into German, he rendered it as 'die sogenannte ursprüngliche Akkumulation', and then, when *Das Kapital* was translated into English, it became 'primitive accumulation'. Not only are the main terms ('previous', *ursprünglich* and 'primitive') not direct equivalents, but Marx distances himself from association with the idea through his use of the qualifier 'so-called'. Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, Book II, Introduction, Penguin, Harmondsworth and New York, 1999, pp. 371–2; Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, trans. Ben Fowkes, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1976, p. 871. References to the original German are from Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, Anaconda Verlag, Cologne, 2009.
2. For a recent critical review of these debates, see Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View*, Verso, London and New York, 2002.
3. Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, pp. 876, 928.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 899.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 889.
6. Peter Kropotkin, 'Western Europe', in *The Conquest of Bread and Other Writings*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, p. 221.
7. Kropotkin: 'while combating the present monopolization of land, and capitalism altogether, the anarchists combat with the same energy the state, as the main support of that system. Not this or that special form, but *the state altogether*.' Kropotkin, 'Anarchism,' in *The Conquest of Bread*, p. 235.
8. Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*, Routledge, London and New York, 2003, pp. 348–9.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 349.
10. For instance, Luxemburg's work earns unexpected praise from Hannah Arendt on precisely this point regarding primitive accumulation. See Arendt, *Imperialism: Part Two of the Origins of Totalitarianism*, Harvest, New York, 1979, pp. 27–8. For a less surprising contemporary use, see David Harvey, *The New Imperialism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003.
11. Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1983, and *Dominance Without Hegemony*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1998. Another prominent example of such an argument can be found in Samir Amin's *Accumulation on a World Scale: A Critique of the Theory of Underdevelopment*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1974.
12. Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation*, Autonomedia, New York, 2004, pp. 12–13. I have also benefited greatly from: Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery*, Verso, London and New York, 1997; Massimo De Angelis, 'Separating the Doing and the Deed: Capital and the Continuous Character of the Enclosures', *Historical Materialism*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2004, pp. 57–87, and 'Marx and Primitive Accumulation: The Continuous Character of Capital's "Enclosures"', *The Commoner* 2, September 2001; Onur Ulas Ince, 'Primitive Accumulation, New Enclosures, and Global Land Grabs:

- A Theoretical Intervention', *Rural Sociology*, vol. 79, no. 1, March 2013, pp. 104–31; Michael Perelman, *The Invention of Capitalism: Classical Political Economy and the Secret History of Primitive Accumulation*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2000.
13. Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2014, p. 10.
 14. See Kevin Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2010; and Gareth Stedman Jones, 'Radicalism and the Extra-European World: The Case of Karl Marx', in Duncan Bell, ed., *Victorian Visions of Global Order: Empire and International Relations in Nineteenth-Century Political Thought*, University of Cambridge Press, Cambridge, 2007.
 15. Karl Marx, 'A Letter to NK Mikailovsky', transcribed and reprinted in *The New Internationalist*, vol. 1, no. 4, November 1934, p. 1. Marx makes the same point in his letter to the Russian activist Vera Zasulich. Karl Marx, 'A Letter to Vera Zasulich', in David McClelland, ed., *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1987.
 16. For a discussion of these, and other key references, see Werner Bonefeld, 'Primitive Accumulation and Capitalist Accumulation: Notes on Social Constitution and Expropriation', *Science & Society*, vol. 75, no. 3, July 2011, pp. 379–99; Jim Glassman, 'Primitive Accumulation, Accumulation by Dispossession, Accumulation by "Extra-economic Means"', *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 30, no. 5, 2006, pp. 608–25; Derek Hall, 'Primitive Accumulation, Accumulation by Dispossession and the Global Land Grab', *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 34, no. 9, 2013, pp. 1582–1604; Derek Hall, 'Rethinking Primitive Accumulation: Theoretical Tensions and Rural Southeast Asian Complexities', *Antipode*, vol. 44, no. 4, 2012, pp. 1188–1208. Two oft-cited discussions on these distinctions include a special issue of *The Commoner*, no. 2, September 2001, featuring contributions from The Midnight Notes collective, Massimo De Angelis, Werner Bonefeld, Silvia Federici, and a special issue of *Rethinking Marxism*, vol. 23, no. 3, July 2011, with contributions from Sandro Mezzadra, S. Charusheela and Gavin Walker.
 17. Harvey, *The New Imperialism*, p. 161.
 18. On the frontier metaphor, see Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 2005; Sandro Mezzadra, 'The Topicality of Prehistory: A New Reading of Marx's Analysis of "So-called Primitive Accumulation"', *Rethinking Marxism* vol. 23, no. 3, 2011, pp. 302–21. For influential renderings of enclosures, see E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common*, Merlin Press, London, 1991 and *Midnight Notes* 10, 1990.
 19. Michael Levein, 'The Land Question: Special Economic Zones and the Political Economy of Dispossession in India', *Journal of Peasant Studies* vol. 39, nos 3–4, 2012, p. 940.
 20. For example, W. Wolford, S.M. Borras, R. Hall, I. Scoones and B. White, 'Governing Global Land Deals: The Role of the State in the Rush for Land', *Development and Change*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2013; S.M. Borras and J. Franco, 'Global Land Grabbing and Trajectories of Agrarian Change: A Preliminary Analysis', *Journal of Agrarian Change*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2012.
 21. A similar observation is made in Ince, 'Primitive Accumulation'.
 22. For an influential critique of this historicism, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 2000.
 23. See Ince, 'Primitive Accumulation'.
 24. In the 1st and 2nd German editions of *Das Kapital*, Marx periodically uses the term *Enteignung*. However, in the 3rd and 4th editions (after Marx had worked on the French translation), many of the key Germanic terms have been substituted for Latinate words, e.g. *Expropriation* for *Enteignung*, *Exploitation* for *Ausbeutung*.
 25. For example, Peter Linebaugh, *Stop, Thief! The Commons, Enclosures, and Resistance*, PM Press, Oakland CA, 2014.
 26. Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*, ch. 27.
 27. *Capital*, Volume 1, p. 889. Translation modified: 'Der letzte große Enteignungsprozeß der Ackerbauer von Grund und Boden endlich ist das sog. "Clearing of Estates" (Lichten der Güter, in der Tat Wegfegung der Menschen von denselben). Alle bisher betrachteten englischen Methoden gifpelten im "Lichten." Marx, *Das Kapital*, 1, p. 673.
 28. Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, p. 893.
 29. *Ibid.*, p. 908; emphasis added.
 30. *Ibid.*, p. 891.
 31. *Ibid.*, ch. 33. To see the intentionality behind Wakefield's analysis, one need only read his 1849 work, *A View of the Art of Colonization*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010, which is expressly offered as a theory of systematic colonization.
 32. Even here, however, we should be careful not to impose a false chain of equivalence. To say that land can be conceptualized as a commodity is not to say that it is a commodity like any other. The very conception of 'commodity' already denotes a mysterious dual-sided character, disclosed dialectically. Commodities are expressed as both use- and exchange-value, and in this sense all commodities must be both *alike* and *unlike*. So, to notice that the land can be a commodity is not to deny the possibility (indeed, the certainty) that land must retain some trace of its use-value, making it both like other commodities and also importantly unlike them.
 33. Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, p. 284.
 34. *Ibid.*, p. 296.
 35. *Ibid.*, p. 284.
 36. *Ibid.*, p. 285; emphasis added.
 37. *Ibid.*, p. 758.
 38. My understanding of Marx on 'nature' is indebted to Alfred Schmidt's 1962 *The Concept of Nature in Marx* (Verso, London and New York, 2014), as well as the discussion of this work in Neil Smith, *Uneven Development* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1984) and John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (Monthly Review Press, New York, 2000).
 39. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of our Time* (1944), Beacon Press, Boston MA, 2001.
 40. This is true of David Harvey's use of the phrase 'accumulation by dispossession', which is offered as only a more general rephrasing of primitive accumulation, with no specific reference to land or nature.
 41. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, Penguin, Harmondsworth and New York, 1993, pp. 88 and 497; emphasis added.