THE CONTEMPORARY SIGNIFICANCE OF PRIMITIVE ACCUMULATION*

INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

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We introduce this discussion on the contemporary significance of primitive accumulation with an attempt to clarify the relation between Marx’s concept of primitive accumulation and David Harvey’s notion of accumulation by dispossession. Marx defines primitive accumulation as the “process...which creates the capital relation...” (Marx 1977: p. 874). His historical account emphasizes the centuries-long process by which English peasants were forced off the land, corralled into wage-labor, and disciplined by state repression to the requirements of capital accumulation. In our view, some commentators have misinterpreted Marx’s emphasis on the violent or coercive moments of primitive accumulation. Marx does not define primitive accumulation in such terms. Rather, his historical account “leave[s] on one side...the purely economic driving forces behind the agricultural revolution” that eliminated the independent peasantry (Marx 1977: p. 883). However, as Marx contended with the creation myths of classical political economy, he was keen to demonstrate that “conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short force, play the greatest part” in this process (Marx 1977: p. 874).

Marx’s concept of primitive accumulation extends beyond the immediate process of dispossession. He identifies colonialism, the exploitation and murder of indigenous peoples, slavery, and the technology of public debt as “chief moments” in the process of primitive accumulation. These provided surpluses which formed an essential basis for the development of capitalist production in Europe (Marx 1977: p. 915). It is this insight which Harvey develops in his work on accumulation by dispossession. As we understand it, the conceptual specificity of accumulation by dispossession lies in the idea that “appropriation can sometimes try to do without production” (Harvey 2006: p. 162). While the expanded reproduction of capital requires the production and appropriation of surplus value, capitalists may seek to appropriate without investing in the production of surplus value through the exploitation of wage-labor. For Harvey, this explains much about contemporary capitalism. The present era is one in which crises of overaccumulation have increasingly foreclosed possibilities for profitable investment in expanded reproduction, driving capital to seek out opportunities for accumulation through dispossession. But the extent to which such efforts entail primitive accumulation, as Marx defined it, is a contingent, empirical question – one we believe to be inadequately addressed in recent deployments and reworking of Harvey’s concept.

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The political implications of Harvey’s turn to accumulation by dispossession have become a subject of controversy. At issue is the relationship between struggles over accumulation by dispossession and those forms of politics more readily understood as “class struggle”. In our view, the contributions included here usefully undermine one-sided approaches to anti-capitalist politics. “Class struggle” is immanently present in worker-capitalist conflicts in the “advanced” capitalist world, even where these struggles center on the reform of capitalism rather than its supersession. But class struggle is no less central to capital’s efforts to enroll new people and places in its logic. In our view it is resistance to the logic of capital, whether or not this is explicit, which defines the terrain of anti-capitalist politics. This implies an organic basis for unity among those forms of struggle and resistance which the left unfortunately tends to divide into “class struggle” on the one hand and “social movements” against accumulation by dispossession on the other.

Bram Buscher’s discussion of neoliberal conservation in Southern Africa reminds us that the modalities of primitive accumulation are indeed multiple. Today, the architects of primitive accumulation feel compelled to enroll potentially dispossessed peoples in their projects. This suggests to us that one effect of nationalist, socialist, democratic, and anti-colonial movements has been to mute the more overtly coercive elements of primitive accumulation. At the same time, it is critical to see that capital’s expansive logic may lurk within seemingly benign projects carried out under the sign of “conservation,” or even “poverty reduction.” Jim Glassman argues persuasively for seeing continuity in the nature of U.S. imperialism and its relation to the dynamics of capital accumulation, rather than a decisive shift toward accumulation by dispossession. This raises questions about any suggestion that particular forms of anti-capitalist politics should be privileged. Daniel Buck’s contribution suggests understanding primitive accumulation as a range of processes which set the stage for the subordination of people and places to the competitive logic of capital – to the law of value. As James Sidaway emphasizes, capital’s efforts to subordinate people, space and place to its logics are pervasive and ongoing, and they extend well beyond the shop-floor and the state apparatus. So too, in our view, should the Marxist left’s notion of class struggle. As our essay seeks to demonstrate, there are substantive distinctions between struggles over primitive accumulation, accumulation by dispossession, and the expanded reproduction of capital. But these distinctions should not be converted into artificial dividing lines when it comes time to challenge the subordination of peoples and places to the logic of capital.

References

LETTERS OF GOLD: ENABLING PRIMITIVE ACCUMULATION THROUGH NEOLIBERAL CONSERVATION

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Abstract: In Capital I, Marx wrote that the history of the separation of the producers from the means of production “is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire” (Marx, 1976: 875). This ‘so-called primitive accumulation’, or ‘accumulation by dispossession’ in David Harvey’s words, continues unabated. Yet, its framing has changed considerably. Increasingly, capitalists have tried to avoid writing primitive accumulation in ‘letters of blood and fire’. Instead, they focus on creating the ‘enabling environment’ for accumulation by positing neoliberal capitalism as the ‘only alternative’. This short essay focuses on nature conservation in Southern Africa to illustrate that this seemingly ‘civilized’ or ‘inevitable’ accumulation is none other than the induced self-marginalisation of local people under the ‘golden letters’ of win-win neoliberal conservation.

Introduction

In Capital I, Marx wrote that the history of the separation of the producers from the means of production “is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire” (Marx, 1976: 875). This ‘so-called primitive accumulation’, or ‘accumulation by dispossession’ in David Harvey’s words, continues unabated. Yet, its framing has changed considerably. Increasingly, capitalists have tried to avoid writing primitive accumulation in ‘letters of blood and fire’. Instead, they focus on creating the ‘enabling environment’ for accumulation by positing neoliberal capitalism as the ‘only alternative’. This short essay focuses on nature conservation in Southern Africa to illustrate that this seemingly ‘civilized’ or ‘inevitable’ accumulation is none other than the induced self-marginalisation of local people under the ‘golden letters’ of win-win neoliberal conservation.

Neoliberal Conservation

Environmental conservation has long been regarded as a bulwark against capitalism. Yet, the last two decades have shown it to be remarkably susceptible to neoliberal intrusion (Heynen et al, 2007). In fact, ‘neoliberal conservation’ has moved beyond opening up the natural realm to the logic of capital, and as such also beyond the more traditional Marxist political ecology emphasis that nature must be seen as a set of “radically different environments that have been created under several centuries of capitalism” (Harvey, 1998: 332). It is the idea that nature can only be ‘saved’ through its submission to capital and its subsequent revaluation in capitalist terms. As such, it is fast becoming a vital part of a ‘nature and universalised capitalism’ (Wood, 1997) of which David Harvey (2006: 93) argues that “there is an aggregate degree of accumulation through dispossession that must be maintained if the capitalist system is to achieve any semblance of stability”. While not arguing that capitalism can ever be a ‘stable system’, it follows that if neoliberal conservation is true to its name, it has to contribute to this ‘maintenance’. Obviously, primitive accumulation under the heading of nature conservation is not new and has plenty historical precedents. As Michael Perelman (2007: 51) reminds us, the Game Laws against poaching in 18th century Britain had ‘decidedly capitalistic’ effects “insofar as they succeeded in accelerating the process of primitive accumulation”. Yet, whereas the Game Laws were harshly enforced,
contemporary conservation claims a more inclusive and cooperative mode of operation.

Neoliberal conservation purports to be sensitive to the needs of conservation and local people but only insofar as they are both mediated and (re)constituted by the logic of the market. Based on previous research on transfrontier conservation (Büscher, 2009) I argue that in Southern Africa, the neoliberal conservation discourse centres on the perceived possibility of continuously increasing the ‘multiple wins’ necessary to keep conservation legitimate. Phrased differently, conservation in a hypercompetitive, neoliberal public domain increasingly needs to broaden its constituencies and thematic reach in order to remain legitimate. Transfrontier conservation – conservation of areas that straddle the borders of multiple countries – effectuates this by increasing the amount of jurisdictions and ‘stakeholders’ involved in conservation. Under the banner of ‘peace parks’, transfrontier conservation advocates reconfigure social and political relations into economic ones, leading to preservation of nature’s ‘services’ for current and future generations, profits for business and local ‘line-managers’ and cooperation between states.

By far the most influential advocate of peace parks in Southern Africa is the ‘Peace Parks Foundation’, founded in 1997 by the late billionaire entrepreneur Anton Rupert. According to Rupert, “sinking beneath the weight of war and survival and of exploding populations searching for living space are Africa’s designated protected areas, the crown jewels of a tourism industry which has the potential to provide a sustainable way of life”. He adds: “poverty stricken Africa desperately needs alternatives to subsistence living, and the creation of jobs from tourism gives these” (PPF, 2000: 2). As in many other neoliberal conservation set-ups, the tourism market is seen as the best way to marry conservation, development and private sector profits (Igoe and Brockington, 2007). The practice of ‘nature-based tourism’, however, can often more accurately be described as primitive accumulation.

One example should suffice here, drawn from one of the major transfrontier conservation areas (TFCA) in Southern Africa, the Maloti-Drakensberg TFCA between Lesotho and South Africa. Within the TFCA, close to one of the main protected areas and the town of Clarens – a booming tourist town on the South African side - the Royal Maluti company aims to establish a large two-times 18-hole golf estate. The company advertises itself as ‘the rare exception’ and boasts of possessing “a place of untouched beauty (...) where the mountains meet the sky. A place where you can live, breathe and relax, where freedom and security come together” 1. In order to obtain this ‘place of untouched beauty’, however, an environmental impact assessment had to be conducted, the results of which were communicated to local stakeholders in workshops. Attending one such a workshop in January 2007, the following scene unfolded.

The meeting was attended by some 200 people, mostly black people from the Clarens township of Kgubetswana, who could write their names on a register if they were interested in potential jobs at the golf estate once it was operational. They were apprehensive, however, about whether the jobs would actually materialise, as the owner of another nearby golf course had promised the same but never kept his promise. In what can only be described as outright extortion, the Royal Maluti representative remarked that if the communities would allow the process to stall for months or years, his company would go somewhere else and the Clarens area would lose the investment and employment opportunities. This had the intended effect. Hence, even though most local people did not understand the – very technical – presentation, they gave in as the potential prospect for low-wage subservient jobs was still more appealing than the destitute circumstances most people were living in.

In effect, what transpired was that local people were induced into further self-marginalisation by the threat of the company leaving and taking the employment opportunities with them. Simultaneously, they and other local people, especially from across the border in Lesotho, would be further cut of from the land. While officially private farm-land, much of it was de facto used as commonage land, where people grazed their livestock and obtained other resources, such as reeds for weaving. Hence, who was to ‘live, breathe and relax’ in this space all of a sudden became much more narrowly and

unequally defined, favouring extra-local golf enthusiasts over locals seeking subsistence. Yet, this is not how this scene is generally interpreted. A local newsletter reported that “a project of this magnitude will most certainly have a positive impact on low skilled communities, who will find an abundance of work either temporarily or permanently”. And while the staff of the TFCA project disagreed with Royal Maluti’s methods, they were more concerned with extending the ‘employment benefits’ to the Lesotho side, rather than stopping the development or negotiating access to the land. After all, one of the transfrontier intervention’s key objectives was to help develop the right ‘enabling environment’ within which private capital could be attracted to help secure the conservation of environmental services and provide jobs through tourism. Glassman (2006: 620) refers to this as the stimulation of primitive accumulation through ‘extra-economic political interventions’. What is really going on, then, is poignantly described by Mark Dowie, in his recent book on ‘conservation refugees’:

Market-based solutions, which may have been implemented with the best of social and conservation intentions, share a lamentable outcome, barely discernable behind a smokescreen of slick promotion. In almost every case, indigenous people are moved into the lowest end of the money economy, where they tend to be permanently indentured as park rangers (never wardens), porters, waiters, harvesters, or, if they manage to learn a European language, ecotour guides (Dowie, 2009: xxvi).

On top of this, people are further ‘weaned’ of the land and its resources; becoming dependent on an industry they have no control over (Dressler and Büscher, 2007).

Conclusion

Under neoliberal conservation, letters of gold have not replaced ‘blood and fire’. Yet, the ‘thick smokescreen of slick promotion’ does make this reality increasingly less discernible. The Royal Maluti website does not speak of the local, poor residents and the way they were coerced. Instead they focus on how this ‘densely developed estate’ retains 73% of the property in “its natural state as a habitat for birds, plants, and wildlife”. The letters of gold literally dispose of the experiences of nearby township dwellers and the rural communities across the border in Lesotho as well as their access to what has long de facto been used as commonage land for grazing and other resources. Neoliberal conservation further stimulates these types of experiences and inscribes them into beautifully formulated win-win policies. Induced self-marginalisation through low-wage subservient jobs is marketed as equally valuable as large private profits. Under conditions of neoliberalism, conservation is increasingly turning out as a powerful force for continued primitive accumulation, further cementing the idea that nature can only be ‘saved’ through and by capitalism.

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References


Marc Auerbach’s request for reflections on the past and future of primitive accumulation (PA) allows me to summarize a few points I have tried to make regarding PA and imperialism in recent years. In two of the pieces focused on these issues (Glassman 2005, 2006) I directly addressed David Harvey’s useful updating of PA, under the heading of accumulation by dispossession (AD), in his book *The New Imperialism* (Harvey 2003). Since many of the commentaries here have drawn some of their inspiration from this book, I will address my comments to Harvey’s construction of PA/AD.

As I noted in a critical appreciation of Harvey’s notion of AD (Glassman 2006), the strength of his updating of the concept of PA comes in part from the way it highlights the ongoing salience of “extra-economic” moments within the overall process of accumulation, even when the specific means of such extra-economic surplus extraction are historically novel—e.g., the neo-liberal privatization of state enterprises. What I added to this updating is the notion that if the extra-economic moment of capitalist accumulation is seen as ongoing then we should broaden our conception
of capitalist accumulation to include a wider range of activities that have always been deeply interconnected with expanded reproduction. These include forms of extra-economic surplus production and appropriation that have been written about by feminist authors such as Mariarosa Della Costa, Carmen Diana Deere, Lourdes Beneria, Altha Cravey, Cindi Katz, and Geraldine Pratt, including women's unpaid household production and social reproduction. The ways that these social reproductive activities feed into and affect production, accumulation, and surplus extraction are too varied to summarize simply, so the point is to call attention to an ongoing research and activist agenda that—like the attention newly being paid to other forms of PA and AD—might help us better understand the ways in which capitalist restructuring articulates with processes like shifts in household divisions of labor.

This point might be seen as a friendly amendment to Harvey's overall argument. On the topic of PA/AD, imperialism, and the neo-liberal reconstruction of global capitalism, however, I have partly taken issue with Harvey's arguments (Glassman 2005). For Harvey, neo-liberal PA/AD is a renewed effort by capitalists and core states to extract surplus by extra-economic means in an effort to fend off crisis tendencies. In this context, as Harvey sees the matter, US imperialism is resurgent in the post-Fordist era and AD is now becoming the cutting edge of imperialist practice; thus the center of gravity of social struggles within the anti-globalization movement needs to recognize this shift, without neglecting the ongoing salience of expanded reproduction (Harvey 2003, 176-77). I argue against the notion that there has been a major shift in US imperial practice during the neo-liberal era, even during the tenure of the US neo-conservatives in the presidency. There is not, in my view, what could meaningfully be called a “new” form of US imperialism.

On one level, what I argue is that little has changed in either the general foundations of US foreign policy or the general objectives of that foreign policy. As key US foreign policy makers surveyed the world at the end of World War II, their primary concern was to reconstruct a global economy in ways that allowed US capital the “elbow room” it needed in order to profitably re-invest surplus capital abroad, export surplus commodities for which there was inadequate demand in the US market, and cheapen the prices of imported resources which were scarce or expensive in the United States. Although there were tactical differences between conservatives and liberal internationalists—predecessors of today’s neo-conservatives and neo-liberals, respectively—over how to fulfill these objectives, the general directions of policy were clear and were consistently institutionalized through various compromise coalitions. This was the overall orientation of US foreign policy during the period of Keynesianism and Fordism—from, e.g., Truman to Nixon. As I see it, while the official external enemies have now changed, this is still the ongoing, general orientation of US foreign policy in the neo-liberal era—from, e.g., Nixon to Obama.

On another level, I do think that some things are different in the neo-liberal era—and perhaps beyond, if we accept Walden Bello’s precept that we may now be entering a “post-neo-liberal” era as a result of elite responses to the current global economic crisis. The differences have less to do with general US foreign policy orientation or its socio-economic and political bases—even though organized labor was disempowered by capital in the neo-liberal era—than with the global context in which policy is formed. There have been dramatic changes in the global economy and the geo-political economic position of the US state. Such changes include new and aggressive competition from capitalists in all corners of the globe, along with increased industrial production and proletarianization in East Asia. The latter of these phenomena, importantly, may actually undercut the prominence of PA/AD and push social struggles to focus on expanded reproduction. Notwithstanding these changes in global context, I do not think that US foreign policy today should be characterized as the “new imperialism,” since almost everything that the US has recently attempted in places like the Middle East has been entirely consistent with its general efforts in the region (and elsewhere) throughout the Keynesian and Fordist period. Indeed, if there is anything that is deeply different between the Fordist and post-Fordist periods it is not that the US state has lately become more imperialist or imperialist in novel ways but rather that its actions—while militarily
potent and unilateral—are in some ways more desperate and more geo-economically hemmed in by the realities of global capitalist competition.

So if PA, AD, and US imperialism are arguably not taking deeply novel forms in the neo-liberal and (possibly emerging) post-neo-liberal eras, and we have not witnessed a shift from “auto-centered” US capitalism/expanded reproduction to imperialist US capitalism/AD, what is the political take-home message? I can suggest what I think is important by noting the relationship of the two extra-economic aspects of accumulation I have mentioned here—the gender division of labor and US military intervention—to processes of expanded reproduction in the Fordist and post-Fordist United States. As has been pointed out in much feminist political economy, women’s unpaid household labor helped underpin the male “household wage” regime for the best-positioned US workers during the period of the Fordist “labor accord.” This means that extra-economic accumulation based in the household played a crucial role in the process of expanded reproduction. As the labor accord crumbled, the household division of labor was renegotiated and women took on more paid employment. This was spurred by the dynamics of capitalist restructuring, but the demands of the women’s movement for more work opportunities with better pay—as well as for equal rights more generally—also had an impact. While it was scarcely the intent of this movement to do so, one of its effects was to make an expanding lower wage labor force available to those capitalists undertaking restructuring, with long-term impacts such as stagnating or declining real wages for workers, a slight closing of the wage gap between men and women (mainly because of declining wages for men), and—more promisingly—a strengthened awareness among various social activists that gender and labor demands both need to be addressed in order to produce fully liberatory results. The last of these is a lesson that has been taken up by a number of social movement organizations.

Just as the gender division of labor has been an active site of struggle relevant to expanded reproduction in both the Fordist and post-Fordist eras, so military intervention has been central to US-based accumulation in both eras. The Vietnam War (1947-75), to cite just one example, was among the bloodiest US military ventures ever undertaken and occupied the entirety of the Fordist period. Moreover, although the reasons for US entry into Vietnam were complex, the deepest underlying reasons had to do with efforts by US leaders to reconstruct the global economy in ways allowing US capitalists the “elbow room” they needed. Thus, the imperial project was meant to facilitate expanded reproduction at home. Moreover, when the Vietnam War effort became unexpectedly protracted—primarily because of the remarkable resistance of millions of Vietnamese people struggling for national independence—the social and economic strains produced in the United States helped bring down the curtain on US Fordism. This also helped catapult the world into the neo-liberal era—not only because of social changes and declining corporate profits in the United States but because the Vietnam War destroyed prospects for socialism in Vietnam while establishing the foundations of export-oriented
industrial dynamism among US allies in East Asia. This East Asian capitalist dynamism has itself been a major force in the neo-liberal reconstruction of the world.

In both of these cases, struggles that one might see as extra-economic and “outside” of expanded reproduction—US women’s struggles for social and economic equality, Vietnamese nationals’ struggles for national independence—played integral roles in both the maintenance and restructuring of US capitalism, often in unpredicted and unpredictable ways. If this sort of analysis of the dynamics of US Fordist and post-Fordist accumulation is correct, then it suggests the “fronts” relevant to struggle over neo-liberal and post-neo-liberal capitalism are likely to be many and varied. Expanded reproduction was not necessarily the most fundamental site of struggle in the Fordist era, even within the United States, nor is PA/AD necessarily the most fundamental site of struggle outside the United States today. Both kinds of sites are always active and significant, so the political and political-theoretical task is to carefully interrogate the various struggles and find their most productive articulations. Put another way, PA/AD is and always has been an important moment in the overall process of accumulation and surplus appropriation; it is therefore always relevant—and, because it is always/already a moment in accumulation, in dialectic embrace with expanded reproduction, it is irrelevant to single it out at the present.

References


ON PRIMITIVE ACCUMULATION AND ITS SHADOWY TWIN, SUBSUMPTION

Response by:

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Abstract:

Primitive accumulation and accumulation by dispossession significantly strengthen our analyses of neo-liberalism, globalization, and capitalism in general. But processes that appear to be primitive accumulation are often better characterized as the subsumption of labor to capital. More than terminology is at stake in making this distinction: subsumption as opposed to primitive accumulation can highlight different sources of change, and different sites of possible contestation. It is time for a re-appraisal and broader conceptualization of subsumption and its relationship to primitive accumulation.

David Harvey recast our understanding of Capital with the observation that its last section —“So-Called Primitive Accumulation”— may more productively be understood as its second half. The first half of Capital is an analysis of capitalism as if the assumptions made by Smith and Ricardo were correct, to show they were wrong, even on their own terms; the second half relaxes those assumptions to reveal the violent, extra-economic processes that must underpin the seemingly benign
economic acts of liberal capitalism. Harvey’s immediate target was the survival and expansion of neoliberal capitalism. But he also put primitive accumulation back at the center of our analysis of capitalism, where it should always have been, as internal, ongoing and contemporary (Harvey, 2003). Reading Capital with this in mind, one sees primitive accumulation everywhere, as if tugging at a leash held by Marx until suddenly released in that last section. Working out the full implications of this paradigm shift has been an important element in my own work, whether in expanding the scope of the traditional “prior to” sense of its centrality to the transition to capitalism in China (Walker and Buck, 2007), or exploring the implications that Harvey’s recuperated “internal and ongoing” sense might have for how we think about natural resources, technology change, and the future of capitalism (Buck, 2007a).

But I found my understanding of primitive accumulation challenged by a case study in Shanghai, of networks linking large urban factories with small subcontractors, specifically township- and village-owned enterprises in the surrounding countryside (see Buck, 2007b). Urban and rural factories alike prospered from the mid-1980s until the mid-1990s, when the urban factories were suddenly slammed by cheaper competition from other regions of China. The resulting reconfiguration of the networks drove widespread privatization of the collectively-owned rural factories. This was clearly a case of the enclosure of a commons. From the vantage point of the enterprises and their localities, privatization (or rationalization of property rights) appeared as primitive accumulation, or accumulation by dispossession. But the radical restructuring of these networks did more than create property rights. It reworked an important set of linkages between city and country and, in the process, reworked the political economic fabric of the rural. It swept away a set of social relations through which rural localities and their peasant/workers had retained a significant portion of the value they produced. It replaced these relations with a set that reduced the workers to producing at, or below, cost. From this vantage point, the transition process appeared as a more complete subordination of peasants, together with their localities and enterprises, to the imperatives of urban capital, and thus more akin to what Marx called the subsumption of labor to capital.

Was this primitive accumulation or subsumption? Both views seem correct, depending on the vantage point. But its dual nature highlights the danger in understanding this process as primitive accumulation alone, and suggests that more work is required to understand the relationship between these two concepts. At first glance, the relationship appears straightforward. For Marx the main identifying characteristic of capitalism was commodity production in which labor-power was itself commodified. The development of wage relations was thus the key to any “transition” to capitalism, just as much as property rights per se. On the one hand, the development of wage relations was predicated upon the often violent separation of people from their means of production, or primitive accumulation. On the other hand, the subsumption of labor to capital was described as occurring in successive historical stages: formal subsumption occurs when labor begins to work for capital, rather than for itself. The capitalist form is not fully realized until real subsumption, however, when capital reworks “the mode of production…the productivity of the workers and the relations between workers and capitalists” (Marx 1976: 1035).

Marx associated formal subsumption with absolute surplus value, which is ultimately about extending the length of the working day, and real subsumption with relative surplus value (diminishing—through increases in productivity—the portion of the working day devoted to reproducing the laborer’s wage-costs). Primitive accumulation (in the traditional “prior to” sense) and formal subsumption are analytically distinct, but also appear as the two necessary sides of a single movement by which workers are brought into the circuits of capital and under the regime of the working day. It would seem correct then to associate primitive accumulation with absolute surplus value as well. Likewise, “internal and ongoing” primitive accumulation appears as ways that capitalism continues to internalize things from outside itself, including new “non-capitalist” spheres created by capitalism itself—whether the industrial reserve army, deterritorialized spaces to be reterritorialized, or new realms opened up for enclosure and appropriation by new technological frameworks (Buck, 2007a). As such,
the various forms of primitive accumulation, like formal subsumption, can be thought of as ‘horizontal’ moves involving absolute surplus value. They are distinguished from other moves that are ‘vertical’ by comparison—ones that intensify, or deepen, already existing capitalist relations and thus involve relative surplus value.

The two socio-spatial subcontracting regimes identified in my study can be likened to periods of formal and real subsumption, and absolute and relative surplus value, respectively. The first move, the formation of the rural industrial sector in the 1980s, brought peasants and the countryside into the market economy in a relatively extensive way that was nonetheless very heavily inflected by socialist production relations; those relations were later qualitatively reworked and intensified by the dynamics of capital accumulation, a crisis of overaccumulation, and the attendant network restructurings of the late 1990s (Buck, 2007b). The oddity of this case is that the privatization associated with primitive accumulation happened alongside the second movement (real subsumption, relative surplus value), rather than the first. The privatization of the rural enterprises, that is: primitive accumulation in the “prior to” sense of separation of peasants from the land is still far from complete ten years later (Walker and Buck, 2007).

This unusual circumstance shows that even the ‘prior to’ brand of primitive accumulation occurs in stages, not a single moment—when can we say it is complete? It also suggests that formal and real subsumption might be understood as something more than successive historical stages. Capitalism tends to colonize all aspects of modern and everyday life (Debord, 1977; Lefebvre, 1991). But even a cursory glance at the ways the thin line between accumulation (M-C-M’), and primitive accumulation, shifts with each reconstitution of the modern household (Goodman and Redclift, 1991) reminds us that the capitalist mode of production, like Gramsci’s hegemony, can never be total and complete. While Marx made a clear technical distinction between formal and real subsumption, we need not be trapped by those two moments into missing the wider point about the ongoing, increasingly intense incorporation of people into the circuits and logics of capital—through relative, as well as absolute, surplus value. Marx himself left this door open when he described the real subsumption of labor under capital as a “complete (and constantly repeated) revolution” (1876: 1035). With a somewhat broadened view we can allow subsumption to share with primitive accumulation the qualities of piecemeal, uneven, nonlinear, and ongoing. It is also possible to imagine the point of production as only one of many sites at which subsumption can take place, including place itself.

At one level, the difference is academic—Marx was very clear that the distinction between absolute and relative surplus value is ultimately fictitious. But capital territorializes on both fronts at once: it expands outward, horizontally, to incorporate new areas; and inward, vertically, to deepen relations within. Not everything happening to the world’s peasants is primitive accumulation—they are absorbed steadily into the expanding market economy through ongoing and successive rounds of subsumption as well. Disentangling the twinned processes of primitive accumulation and subsumption can sharpen our understanding of particular moments and suggest otherwise obscured sources of change and sites of contestation. In the China case cited here, a primitive accumulation analysis would suggest contestation of the privatization of local factories; however, the reworking of the labor-capital relation attenuated through inter-local networks was just as constitutive of the shift that disadvantaged the countryside. Carefully disentangling these twinned processes can also point toward more robust and precise geographical analyses of the mechanisms through which capital rationalizes and reworks space and nature in accordance with its own imperatives. For example, an overly narrow focus on primitive accumulation risks one-sided understandings of capitalism’s ongoing productions and appropriations of nature through technological innovation. This, like the China case, has been characterized both as primitive accumulation (Buck, 2007a) and subsumption (Smith, 2007), lending saliency and urgency to the argument made in this essay.

References


--------- 2007b. The subsumption of space and the


**Abstract:** The emerging body of literature on *accumulation by dispossession* (ABD) sharpens the political edge of the critique of contemporary capitalism. While this is welcome, there are also reasons for concern about the way ABD has been taken up. This is so, because the processes at the heart of Marx’s enunciations of primitive accumulation are widely considered passé or are subsumed within the broadened conception of ABD. It matters because the separation of agricultural households from land is an ongoing and central reality of our times, and the social effects have been disastrous. Achieving greater clarity around primitive accumulation and the constellation of issues associated with the agrarian question, then, is of more than passing importance. This article argues that radical geographers should return to the land to undertake an open and materialist engagement with contemporary processes of primitive accumulation.

The recent literature drawing on David Harvey’s concept of accumulation by dispossession (ABD) is welcome and politically significant. For a generation or

*We are grateful to Richard Peet for comments on an earlier draft.*
more, processes related to dispossession around the world have been interpreted through seemingly self-evident, yet ideologically powerful notions like capital investment, growth, and economic development. In the wake of Harvey’s theoretical innovation, however, elements of theft, robbery and violence are receiving much-deserved attention. At the same time, we have concerns about the manner in which ABD has been taken up. In our view, there are significant political and theoretical consequences of conceptualizing dispossession primarily through ABD. We argue for distinguishing those forms of dispossession that separate people from the conditions of production from more general processes of privatization, appropriation and wealth redistribution.

Conceptually, we understand ABD to include those processes by which capital seeks to appropriate wealth without expanding value in production (Harvey 2006a: 162). In his historical account of neoliberalism and imperialism, Harvey deploys the concept of ABD to emphasize commonalities, across a wide range of mechanisms, through which assets have been redistributed from the masses to the upper classes, and from poor to rich countries (2006b: p. 153). In our view, the following concerns are emphasized when contemporary realities are viewed through this lens: the creation of private property through ‘enclosure’ (Andreasson 2006; Blomley 2008; Sneddon 2007; Springer 2009; Vasudevan, McFarlane, and Jeffrey 2008); the commodification of spaces and processes hitherto outside the ‘circuits of capital,’ including nature (Heynen and Robbins 2005; Prudham 2007; Swyngedouw 2005); the institution of conditions for the globalization of capital (Gordon and Webber 2008; Roberts 2008; Spronk and Webber 2007); the role of devaluations, crises, and finance in accumulation through the redistribution of wealth (Strauss 2009); and the contemporary relevance of “extra-economic” mechanisms of dispossession (Glassman 2006). While some of this work references primitive accumulation specifically, dispossession is seen as a more or less generic process, without special significance for the constitution of capitalist social relations or developmental patterns. In more critical evaluations, concerns have been raised about the conceptual coherence of ABD. In particular, ABD’s relation to accumulation through expanded reproduction is questioned, as is the appropriate characterization of particular processes as either ABD or primitive accumulation (Ashman and Callinicos 2006; Da Costa 2007; De Angelis 2004; Dunn 2007; Fine 2006; Webber 2008). These concerns are often linked with critical assessments of Harvey’s approach to the politics of ABD.

We do not wish to arbitrate these debates. Rather, our aim is to discuss what recedes to the background when classical understandings of primitive accumulation get subsumed within ABD. We contend that the questions which originally concerned Marx have received inadequate attention, despite the overt use of the concept of primitive accumulation. This matters, because the separation of agricultural households from land is an ongoing and central reality of our times. While the social effects have been disastrous, dispossession continues to be defined as a necessary stage of development. Across the Global South, the desire persists for a different form of development. But forging an escape route from the teleology of capitalism as development (Peet with Hartwick 1999; Wainwright 2008) requires critical engagement with Marxist understandings of primitive accumulation and the wider constellation of issues referenced by “the agrarian question” (Hart 1996; Watts 1996). Our argument for attending carefully to primitive accumulation, then, echoes recent work suggesting that geography should engage more directly with the contemporary politics of land (Fraser 2008a; 2008b).

As for primitive accumulation, it may be recalled that Marx found two main elements in it: the separation of the immediate producers from the means of production; and the conversion of varied forms of wealth into capital. Marx’s concern was to illustrate the necessary preconditions for the emergence of capitalism in Western Europe. As Brenner (1977) makes clear, the process by which the immediate producers are proletarianized is contingent and contested; an outcome of both overt coercion and strategic household responses to changing material conditions. The vital element, however, is the disruption of pre-capitalist mechanisms of social reproduction, such that the laboring classes become increasingly market-dependent. But while dispossession is a necessary condition for the rise of industrial capitalism, it is certainly not sufficient. Here, we understand
Marx as “reading history backward” (Ollman 2003: p. 118) rather than proposing a teleological theory in which historical development moves in preordained and necessary stages (see also Cleaver 2009).

The transformations associated with primitive accumulation may be of a historical nature in the advanced capitalist world, but they are contemporarily relevant in the Global South. It is important to recognize, however, that the historical-geographical development of capitalism itself alters the conditions in which primitive accumulation subsequently takes place. In most of the Global South, small agricultural producers can no longer be considered pre-capitalist (Bernstein 2004). While capitalist social relations of production have not permeated all rural spaces (Goodman and Watts 1994; Saul 2005), imperial power and capital certainly have, via the workings of states, international development institutions, and markets for finance, commodities, and labor. Small farmers are unevenly integrated into global processes of capital accumulation on terms mediated by an imperialist state system, radically unequal productive capacities, and the particularity of local social formations. The consequence has been a steady deterioration in the ability of subsistence and petty commodity producers to survive through agricultural production. Even where households retain access to land, wage-labor is an increasingly essential component of their livelihood strategies (Gonzales de la Rocha 2007; Ellis 2006; Webber 2008).

In the way the world is ordered, there is what John Weeks (2001) calls ‘primary’ unevenness between spaces of expanded reproduction and those where capitalism is weakly developed. Post-colonial states promised to narrow the developmental gap through different means, including African socialism and various combinations of a mixed-economy approach. In many instances their actions led to the entrenchment of undemocratic rule by elites and experts (Mitchell 2002). Elsewhere the failure of developmentalism was largely scripted by its inextricable links to global capital, as was the case in the mid-1970s with countries dependent on the export of one or the other commodity. The upshot is that a cursory look at GDP figures today reveals the wide gulf between the center and the margins of global capitalism. In this scenario, the historical correlation between capitalism and development (and modernity) as exemplified by the West finds widespread purchase in the Global South (Ferguson 2006). It should then be no surprise that primitive accumulation, as the supposed necessary step to capitalism, continues to be regarded as the means to development.

By the 1980s the central concern of states in the Global South was to preside over a transition to capitalism. This project, which included the appropriation and privatization of land, has often been couched in the language of creating the conditions for growth and making respective territories attractive to foreign investment. In many instances this was violently imposed, and not only when the process was led by the “Right.” In the Indian state of West Bengal, for example, the ruling Communist Party’s (CPI(M)) development through “capitalism from below” has entailed the dispossession of small farmers who were past beneficiaries of the CPI (M)’s land reforms. It would be too easy to dismiss such projects simply as opportunism, corruption, or surrender. At stake though, are competing framings of agrarian transition. Growing opposition to projects organized by the Communist-led state government in this instance calls for a theoretical consideration of primitive accumulation and its intersections with development (Da Costa 2007; Mishra 2007; Pillai 2007).

Emerging agrarian movements, such as the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST) in Brazil, and its transnational partner Vía Campesina, envision a different developmental model premised in the first place on the dismantling of the corporate agri-food system (Borras 2008; McMichael 2006; Patel 2007; Wolford 2007). The Via Campesina program in its current form seeks to underwrite both security for rural populations and broader developmental projects. In our view, most important is that Via Campesina begins from the material conditions of the present. Our aim in directing attention to contemporary processes of primitive accumulation is to insist on a more open and materialist engagement with contemporary agrarian struggles. Marxists have tended to assess these struggles from the standpoint of the historic necessity of capitalism (if only as a precondition for its supersession). We do not dismiss the problems associated with alternative
development projects in countries lacking a strong industrial base. However, we think there is sufficient evidence to reject as utopian the idea that capitalism will develop the South. Rather, we must begin by asking, “What are the conditions of possibility for a different kind of development?” This is a question that should animate geographers concerned with dispossession.

References


Prudham, S. 2007. The fictions of autonomous invention:
Amongst my generation of geographers (I was born in the 1960s), for a while there was a tendency to see what Marx had termed primitive accumulation as something that had happened mostly in the past. After all, Marx’s *Capital* was, amongst other things, a sweeping account of the rise of money, industry and the drama of imperial power; the making of a class of owners and another of workers (and all manner of intermediaries). *Capital* was a story of struggle over who would gain from this and of technological revolutions (that were, so Marx taught us to see, also means of production) and this produced and required new spatial and territorial configurations; great cities, empires, ports, canals, railways and new experiences and representations of space and time.

Primitive accumulation was the precondition for all this. It referred, for example, to the ways that the transatlantic trade in people (slavery) and other commodities...
produced wealth that followed into Europe and how this paved the way for further development there. Many landed estates, banks and the commerce of cities like the western port of Bristol derived or profited from this trade; which in turn ultimately relied on conquest and coercion elsewhere. Primary accumulation also referred to enclosure closer to home: to the process whereby serfs and peasants were evicted from the land and become the new proletariat – for once expelled they had no other way to live, unless they could sell their labor. In his chapter in Capital on 'The Secret of Primitive Accumulation', Marx (Capital, volume one, chapter 26) describes what happened as the new working class: 'became sellers of themselves only after they had been robbed of all their own means of production, and of all the guarantees of existence afforded by the old feudal arrangements. And the history of this, their expropriation, is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire.”

Enclosure was something we learnt about in historical geography; as something rooted in imperial compulsion or (in the British case) agricultural developments and the forcible division of land into ‘private’ estates, ‘cleared’ of many who once lived upon them. Moreover, there was also a sense that, aside from a few legacies and places such as Gibraltar, French Guiana, Hong Kong or Macau, formal imperialism was also mostly something historical. The informal kind persisted in American policy. But colonialism and enclosure were – it was argued - features and forces more evident in a past phase of capitalism.

The focus of most critical analysis of contemporary capitalism was therefore on the deepening of capitalist social relations and the new spaces this yielded. So, the literatures on suburbanization, new patterns, means and modes of commodification (which thereby created new ‘needs’) and the production of new urban spaces (such as gentrification) became the focus of much work. Accounts of this, such as The Limits to Capital (Harvey, 1982) about commodities, rent, land and the urbanization of capital made these links and sent me off, as a graduate student, to think about what all this meant in a postcolonial city that had undergone revolution, war and the swift reversal of a socialist strategy. I studied this in Mozambique, where land and property were nationalized after independence in 1975 and subsequently (in the light of war and IMF/World Bank led structural adjustment) re-commoditized in the 1990s (see Power and Sidaway, 1995). Years later, I was part of team that traced the sometimes violent enclosure of elite enclave spaces on Bintan, an Indonesian island near to Singapore – as areas of coastline once open to local fishing communities became luxury hotels and golf courses sealed off by fences from the rest of the island (see Bunnell, Muzaini and Sidaway, 2006). In both cases, it was evident that this was linked to modes of geopolitical (indeed, imperial) power and that enclosure was not just some past phase in the geography of capitalism.

Nor had imperialism really gone away. It had been in temporary retreat after the debacle in Vietnam. But it was being reformulated alongside a new phase of what was subsequently termed ‘globalization’ (which in turn, had long roots and antecedents). The trajectory of this has been excavated in David Harvey’s (2003) short but sharp account of The New Imperialism, where, as others have recounted here, Harvey also points to a new phase of what he terms ‘accumulation by dispossession’ present within wider contemporary capitalist and imperial logics. He prefers this term, since “it seems peculiar to call an ongoing process ‘primitive’ or ‘original’” (144). Yet Harvey (2003, 145-146) goes on to notes how: ‘All the features of primitive accumulation that Marx mentions have remained powerfully present within capitalism’s historical geography until now. Displacement of peasant populations and the formation of a landless proletariat has accelerated in countries such as Mexico and India in the last three decades, many formerly common property resources, such as water, have been privatized.... Nationalized industries have been privatized. Family farming has been taken over by agribusiness. And slavery has not disappeared (particularly in the sex trade).’

Harvey therefore joins a wider lively debate about the past and present roles of enclosure and the making of private property within the forging of capital and its multiple routes of accumulation and circulation (see the useful survey by Vasudevan, McFarlane and Jeffrey, 2008). From these vantage points, it is now possible to see how such moments were never really absent. Thinking
of them as primarily an historical geography was, it is now evident, quite mistaken. And in hindsight, I did not really need to travel to Indonesia or Mozambique to see them at work.

Firstly, I could read about how, at the very time that I was growing up in England, an intense phase of enclosure was also being foisted upon the Amazon basin by the Brazilian military regime (Hecht and Cockburn, 1990). The year I was born, the military government there seized power in Brazil, with support from the Johnson presidency in the USA. Through the next two decades they would be motivated by visions of development, security and geopolitics (and prospects of power and profit) to enable roads, settlements and ranches to be carved out of the Amazon forest. Over the same years, the strategy of what was mischievously (and rather cleverly) called ‘privatization’ was being formulated in the UK (Cockett, 1993). Later, the decline of state socialist modes of accumulation elsewhere was part of a widening and deepening of capitalism and as assets were seized in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet system, a new Russian bourgeoisie reappeared on the scene. It was all connected, dialectically, as Harvey encouraged us to think.

But enclosure was also closer to (my) home. My parents had purchased a newly built suburban house in the English midlands in 1966. I was two. They had been able, like many others of their generation, to acquire a mortgage (from a collectively owned ‘building society’) to buy a house there. The house was built by a local property developer on former farmland and sold, like others on the estate, for profit. I would be able to describe many social geographies of the estate from the late 1960s through the turbulent decade of the 1970s and into the early 1980s, to the point when I left to go to college and learn more about the world.

Hence I could tell stories of from the 1970s of sectarian and ‘racial’ cleavages (and commonalities) in the aftermath of the bombings in nearby Birmingham by the IRA in the 1970s and with the rise (not for the last time, sadly) of the far right. I could tell stories of class and labor; for example, how many folk nearby worked for large corporations such as the care-maker Rover (also nationalized and de-nationalized through these years) or in the wider mechanical engineering or steel industry in this one-time heartland of industrial capitalism. But there was also a process of enclosure and a contest over its terms that unfolded before my eyes.

The housing estate backed onto a golf course. I can recall signs going up declaring that trespassers on the course would be prosecuted and wire fences being erected around its perimeter. It is ecologically rich, a mixture of grass, scrub and woodlands that happened to be full of birdlife (a growing interest of mine as a child, something I was later delighted to realize I shared with many others). But as children, it was also our playground. Me and my friends had to sneak through the fences (something that was largely condoned by our parents, who somehow could see it was not right we could not play in these woods, if we did no damage). I can recall times we clashed with or were chased away by the workers charged with maintaining the golf course grounds. When this happened, we could, however, retreat to land either side of the estate that was a mixture of soccer fields and scrubland. Whilst the golf course itself was fenced and marked as ‘private’ the land either side was owned by the local state (‘the council’ as it was called) and still open to all.

I later (as a sixth form geography student poring over old maps of the locality) realized with some shock that most of the area (including the golf course) had been (almost in living memory) treated as common land. It was even marked on an early twentieth century map as ‘Pedmore Common’. Local histories and older relatives confirmed it was once open land; neither treated as private nor fenced. In the course of the twentieth century, part of it came to be administered by the local state and some of it (under the auspices of a charitable foundation that was established in the seventeenth century by an early industrial capitalist associated with local ironworks) had been leased to the golf course. By the 1970s, signs at the golf course declared it as private land. Land where there had been open customary (common) access had become effectively private and was fenced during the second part of the twentieth century. In the early 1970s, the local press (County Express, 1973, 1) revealed proposals to terminate the lease to the golf course and sell what
had once been Pedmore Common for private housing development. This came near end of one of the periodic real estate booms that punctuate the story of British capitalism. A complex battle about land-use zoning ensued. In Britain the terms of debate over zoning are about ‘green belts’ and ‘town and country planning’; a system that emerged out of mid-twentieth century political compromises over land, property and ownership ultimately derived from late feudal and early capitalist property relations (see Booth, 2002). There were proposals that some of the land where I had played be used to build social housing and counter proposals that it be sold for private housing development (with attendant promises of profit and maintaining local property values). These proposals for social housing on the land came from the left (Labour Party) who gained power over the local state following a local government reorganisation initiated by the national Labour government of the 1960s. Subsequently and following the arrival of Thatcher government with its agenda of privatization, at the start of the 1980s that part of this land still administered by the local state was eventually sold for private housing development. Later in that decade (again as an increasingly speculative real estate boom was underway) debates and proposals resurfaced over the prospect of selling the land of the golf course for private housing development (County Express, 1988, 1). Once again, such plans were derailed by a mixture of local protest and the round of real estate boom turning (not for the last time) to bust.

Enclosure and attendant struggle over its terms and who would benefit turn out not some historically or geographically distant phenomenon, unfolding in Africa or Asia. A form of it had taken place in this corner of the English midlands in my lifetime; caught up in wider dynamics of capital flow and politics. I somehow knew as a child that a great deal of politics and power was at play over this land that I loved for the space it afforded me and my mates to roam and whose rich flora and fauna fascinated me. I knew that this was not right, nor was it a natural state of affairs. I can now see how it connects with wider shifts and struggles whose consequences for many are far more serious than restricted access to spaces of play or the piecemeal local erosion of ecological richness.

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