

Marx and primitive accumulation: The continuous character of capital's "enclosures"

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1. Introduction.

In the last twenty years the neoliberal orthodoxy become predominant in all major levels of government and shaped the policy recommendations of the major think tanks all around the world. Countries have witnessed continuous massive attacks on those functions of the state which were designed to compensate for the inadequacies and injustices of the market. Cuts in social spending have taken of course many forms and shapes. This depended on what was the historical and socio-economic context in which they were implemented, either the “rich” countries of the North, the “poor” countries of the South or the “transitional” countries of the East. Yet, upon a cursory reading of the enormous literature on this subject, one is left with the strong sensation that there is something common between, say, the cut in unemployment benefits in Britain brought about by the need to balance the budget; the wave of privatisation in Poland, brought about by the need to dismantle state socialism; and the cuts in food subsidies in Tanzania, brought about by the need to repay foreign debt. This paper suggests that a reinterpretation of Marx’s theory of primitive accumulation may give us some important insights on the *common* social character of what *prima facie* appears to be different policies brought about by different circumstances.

According to one main traditional interpretation, Marx's concept of primitive accumulation indicates the historical process that gave birth to the preconditions of a capitalist mode of production. These preconditions refer mainly to the creation of a section of the population with no other means of livelihood but their labour power to be sold in a nascent labour market and to the accumulation of capital that may be used for nascent industries. In this conception, the adjective “primitive” corresponds to a clear-cut temporal dimension (the past), which becomes the condition for a capitalist future. Alternatively, the same concept of primitive accumulation has been interpreted as a continuous phenomenon within the capitalist mode of production, especially in connection to Marxist analyses describing the subordination of the South to the North of the world economy.

¹ This article is a slightly modified version of my paper 'Marx's Theory of Primitive Accumulation: a Suggested Reinterpretation', in <http://homepages.uel.ac.uk/M.DeAngelis/PIMACCA.htm>.

In this paper I argue that Marx's theory of primitive accumulation may be seen to contain both an historical and a continuity argument, but in forms that depart from traditional interpretations. In the second section I briefly review the two classical approaches to primitive accumulation within the Marxist tradition. In section three I discuss Marx's definition of primitive accumulation and locate it within his broader analysis of the capitalist mode of production. This will lead to my highlighting of two major theoretical implications of Marx's idea of primitive accumulation, that is the fact that it describes a forced *separation* between people and social means of production and that this separation can take many forms. In section four I briefly expand on the latter and survey some of the forms of primitive accumulation discussed by Marx. Finally, in section five, I return to the social meaning of primitive accumulation as identified in section three. By drawing from Marx' theoretical apparatus — mainly his analysis of the relation between subject and object, his theory of alienation, and his distinction between accumulation and primitive accumulation — I argue that primitive accumulation is necessarily present in “mature” capitalist systems and, given the conflicting nature of capitalist relations, assumes a “continuous” character. In the conclusion, I briefly discuss the political implications of this analysis.

To focus on Marx's theoretical discussion, I will abstract here from the debates around the role and meaning of “socialist primitive accumulations”. Also, for the same reason I will not engage in the dissection of the meaning of the different nuances taken by the category studied when in the literature is referred to as either “original”, “primitive” or “primary” accumulation. My use of “primitive accumulation” in this paper is only a choice of convenience, as I believe this has been the most common use of the category (followed by “original” and then “primary”). Challenging this established custom should be the object of another paper.

2. A brief review of the traditional interpretations.

The concept of primitive accumulation is one of those ideas that has entered the common vocabulary of Marx's scholars, without having generated much controversy or theoretical debate².

Within the literature it is possible to identify two main interpretative frameworks of primitive accumulation. The first one may be represented by Lenin's early study *The development of capitalism in Russia* (1899). This approach sees primitive accumulation mostly as the historical premise to the capitalist mode of production and therefore focuses on the process of separation between people and

² This is not the case for the *application* of this concept to historical descriptions of the so called transition from feudalism to capitalism. As I will briefly discuss later, this has generated much debate.

means of production in the moment of transition *between* modes of production. In his polemic against the populists (who believed that the absence of a developed market would prevent capitalist development in Russia) Lenin argued that the disappearance of the peasants and their expropriation along with that of their communities, were the conditions for the creation of the capitalist market in Russia. Lenin saw this process as inevitable and ultimately positive, although he often underlined the contradictions of this process. However, these contradictions do not include patterns of peasants' resistance against expropriation and how such resistance could have contributed to create outcomes contradicting the requirements of the development of Russian capitalism. As he did not foresee a peasant resistance, he did not foresee a Russian's "bloody legislation" (Marx 1867: 896) to meet that resistance.

Rosa Luxemburg's *The Accumulation of Capital* (1913) represents a second different interpretation. Although she formally accepted the understanding of primitive accumulation as a one-time, one-place phenomenon leading to capitalism (for a critique, see Rosdolsky 1977: 279), her theoretical framework points towards a different interpretation. In Luxemburg's framework, Marx's expanded reproduction schemes are only a representation of the mathematical conditions for accumulation in the case in which there are only two classes. In reality, she contends, capitalist production must rely on third parties (peasants, small independent producers, etc.) to be commodity buyers. Thus the enforcement of exchange relations between capitalist and non-capitalist production becomes necessary to realise surplus value. However, this exchange relation clashes with the social relations of non-capitalist production. To overcome the resistance to capital that arises from this clash, capital must resort to military and political violence.

Here Luxemburg introduces a crucial thesis that, independently from the validity of her reasoning and interpretation of Marx's schemes, seems to me fundamental: the extra-economic prerequisite to capitalist production – what we shall call primitive accumulation – is an inherent and continuous element of modern societies and its range of action extends to the entire world. Consequently, Luxemburg is able to combine her theoretical analysis of accumulation with a political conjecture: once the whole world becomes capitalist, capitalist accumulation will have reached its historical end. Here class struggle enters the scene as a *deus ex machina* before the collapse is brought about by objective conditions. As in the case of Lenin, also for Luxemburg resistance and struggle are not *constitutive* elements of primitive accumulation, but only a possible, albeit important, by-product.

Lenin's and Luxemburg's two classic interpretations have left a mark on subsequent approaches. It is perhaps useful to label Lenin's interpretation as "historical primitive accumulation", to indicate an age, historically and temporally defined, describing the pattern of separation between

people and means of production. Luxemburg's approach to primitive accumulation could be instead labelled as "inherent-continuous primitive accumulation", to indicate the fact that the characteristic extra-economic process of separation between people and means of production is a continuous and inherent process of capitalist production. Subsequent more modern interpretations seem to share the basic characteristics of these two approaches. For example, in his classic studies on the development of capitalism, Maurice Dobb uses the category of primitive accumulation to indicate a well-defined age of accumulation of property rights better known as the mercantile age:

If any sense is to be made, therefore, of the notion of a 'primitive accumulation' (in Marx's sense of the term) *prior in time* to the full flowering of capitalist production, this must be interpreted in the first place as an accumulation of capital *claims* — of titles to existing assets which are accumulated primarily for speculative reasons; and secondly as accumulation in the hands of a class that, by virtue of its special position in society, is capable ultimately of transforming these hoarded titles to wealth into actual means of production. In other words, when one speaks of accumulation in an historical sense, one must be referring to the *ownership* of assets, and to a *transfer* of ownership, and not to the quantity of tangible instruments of production in existence. (Dobb 1963: 178)

According to Dobb, therefore, primitive accumulation is accumulation "in an historical sense". It is worth noticing that also Paul Sweezy, Dobb's main opponent in the famous debate on the transition from feudalism to capitalism published in *Science and Society* 1950-53, acknowledges Dobb's "excellent treatment of the essential problems of the period of original accumulation" (Sweezy 1950: 157). The now historic debate on "transition" (collected in Hilton 1978) and its later developments and transfigurations such as the Brenner debate on the pages of the journal *Past and Present* of the 1970s (collected in Astor and Philperin 1985) and later exchanges in *Science and Society* (Gottlieb 1984; Leibman 1984; Sweezy 1986; McLennon 1986) is characterised by a general common acceptance of this historical definition of primitive accumulation.

Different from Dobb's approach of primitive accumulation as an historically prior period, is the approach by Samir Amin, which is closer to the notion of inherent and continuous primitive accumulation that occurs through what Amin defines transfer of value within the world economy:

Relations between the formations of the "developed" or advanced world (the centre), and those of the underdeveloped world (the periphery) are affected by transfers of value, and these constitute the essence of the problem of accumulation on a world scale. Whenever the capitalist mode of production enters into relations with pre-capitalist modes of production, and subjects these to itself, transfers of value take place from the pre-capitalist to the capitalist formations,

as a result of the mechanisms of *primitive accumulation*. These mechanisms do not belong only to the prehistory of capitalism; they are contemporary as well. It is these forms of primitive accumulation, modified but persistent, to the advantage of the centre, that form the domain of the theory of accumulation on a world scale. (Amin 1974: 3)

Another interpretation within this general framework may also include Wallerstein's (1979) notion of a world-system. The continuous character of primitive accumulation in these accounts stresses objective mechanisms of accumulation and circulation of capital.

A careful examination of Marx's definition of primitive accumulation allows us to critically appraise the historical and continuous arguments and reformulating them politically. The crucial idea at the core of Marx's approach is the concept of *separation between producers and means of production* (in what follow I will mostly refer to this simply as *separation*). This concept, when inserted within the contrasting logic of boundless accumulation of capital and people struggles for freedom and dignity, not only help us to describe the recurrent nature of "primitive accumulation", but also points at the central political issue of any alternative to capitalism: that of the *direct access* of means of existence.

3. Marx's concept of primitive accumulation.

3.1. The definition of primitive accumulation.

In the eight chapters of Part Eight of Volume One of *Capital*, Marx discusses "the so-called Primitive Accumulation". For any given time-period, the process of accumulation presupposes of course that some pre-accumulated capital was thrown into the process of production. It seems therefore that capitalist production as a whole presupposes some "original" or "primitive" accumulation. Although he never uses the term, Adam Smith was the first to refer to this notion by claiming that "the accumulation of stock" is a precondition for the division of labour (Smith 1776: 277) and, consequently, for the improvement of the productive power of labour. Marx's approach to primitive accumulation appears from the start linked to the different theoretical meaning he gives to the category of capital. The notion of primitive accumulation is based on the notion of capital as class relation, rather than capital as "stock":

The *capital-relation* presupposes a complete separation between the workers and the ownership of the conditions for the realisation of their labour (Marx 1867: 874. My emphasis).

Given the meaning of capital as class relation, it follows therefore that

the process . . . which creates the *capital-relation* can be nothing other than the process which divorces the worker from the ownership of the conditions of his own labour; it is a process which operates two transformations, whereby the social means of subsistence and production are turned into capital, and the immediate producers are turned into wage-labourers (Marx 1867: 874. My emphasis).

Thus, the

so-called primitive accumulation . . . is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production (Marx 1867: 874-5).

We can also find indication of Marx's emphasis on class relations in the structure of this section of *Capital*. Marx dedicates two chapters of this section on the formation of the working class (Chapters 27 and 28) and three chapters on the formation of the bourgeoisie (Chapters 29, 30 and 31).

There are three central points that I believe are key in understanding Marx's approach to primitive accumulation. The first is that the *separation* of producers and means of production is a common character of *both* accumulation and primitive accumulation. The second is that this *separation* is a central category (if not *the* central category) of Marx's critique of political economy. The third is that the difference between accumulation and primitive accumulation, not being a substantive one, is a difference in the conditions and forms in which this *separation* is implemented. In what follows I analyse these three aspects in sequence.

3.2. Separation and the secret of (primitive) accumulation.

The idea of *separation* applies to both accumulation and primitive accumulation. Marx is extremely precise on this. In Volume 3 of *Capital* he stresses that accumulation proper is nothing else than primitive accumulation — that Marx defined in Volume 1 in terms of the *separation* — “raised to a higher power” (Marx 1894: 354). In the *Theories of Surplusvalue* he is even more precise, writing that accumulation “reproduces the *separation* and the independent existence of material wealth as against labour on an ever increasing scale” (Marx 1971: 315. My emphasis), and therefore “merely presents as a *continuous process* what in *primitive accumulation* appears as a distinct historical process” (Marx 1971: 271; 311-2). Again, in the *Grundrisse* he states: “Once this *separation* is given, the production process can only produce it anew, reproduce it, and reproduce it on an expanded scale” (Marx 1858: 462. My emphasis).

3.3. *The meaning and centrality of “separation” in Marx’s theory.*

It is known that Marx’s own method of investigation starts from “the laws of bourgeois economy . . . [as] a key to the understanding of the past” rather than from the “*real history of the relations of production*” (Marx 1858: 460-1). Thus, understanding what Marx meant by *separation* in the context of capital’s accumulation enables us to appreciate the meaning he gives to the “original” or primitive separation.

In the context of accumulation, separation of producers and means of production means essentially that the “objective conditions of living labour appear as *separated, independent* values opposite living labour capacity as subjective being, which therefore appears to them only as a value of *another kind*” (Marx 1858: 461). The separation of producers and means of production at the social level means the positing of living labour and conditions of production as *independent values* standing in opposition with each other:

The objective conditions of living labour capacity are presupposed as having an existence independent of it, as the objectivity of a subject distinct from living labour capacity and standing independently over against it; the reproduction and *realization*, i.e. the expansion of these *objective conditions*, is therefore at the same time their own reproduction and new production as the wealth of an alien subject indifferently and independently standing over against labour capacity. What is reproduced and produced anew is not only the *presence* of these objective conditions of living labour, *but also their presence as independent values, i.e. values belonging to an alien subject, confronting this living labour capacity* (Marx 1858: 462).

This *separation* therefore is a fundamental condition for Marx’s theory of reification, of the transformation of subject into object. In other words, because of this *separation* “the objective conditions of labour attain a subjective existence *vis-à-vis* living labour capacity” (Marx 1858: 462). This meant that the means of production are subjected to the drive towards self-valorisation and self-expansion, and this, from the perspective of capital, is all that count. On the other hand living labour, the “subjective being” *par excellence*, is turned into a thing among things, “it is merely a *value* of a particular use value *alongside* the conditions of its own realisation as *values* of another use value” (Marx 1858: 462). The specificity of this reified subject — living labour — is that

The material on which it works is *alien* material; the instrument is likewise an *alien* instrument; its labour appears as a mere accessory to their substance and hence objectifies itself in things not *belonging to it*. Indeed, living labour itself appears as *alien vis-à-vis*

living labour capacity, whose labour it is, whose own life's expression it is, for it has been surrendered to capital in exchange for objectified labour, for the product of labour itself (Marx 1858: 462).

The idea of *separation* therefore strictly echoes Marx's analysis of alienated labour, as labour alienated from the object of production, the means of production, the product, and the other producers (Marx 1844). The opposition that we have seen is implicit in this definition, is of course a clashing opposition expressing a "specific relationship of production, a specific social relationship in which the owners of the conditions of production treat living labour-power as a *thing*" (Marx 1863-66: 989)³. These same owners are regarded only as "capital personified", in which capital is understood as having "one sole driving force, the drive to valorize itself, to create surplus-value, to make its constant part, the means of production, absorb the greatest possible amount of surplus labour" (Marx 1867: 342). The concept of *separation* enables us to clarify Marx's reference to capital accumulation as accumulation of social relations: "The capitalist process of production . . . seen as a total, connected process, i.e. a process of reproduction, produces not only commodities, not only surplus-value, but it also produces and reproduces the capital-relation itself; on the one hand the capitalist, on the other the wage-labourer." (Marx 1867: 724)

3.4. *The distinction between accumulation and primitive accumulation.*

Having defined the common character of both accumulation *and* primitive accumulation, Marx is of course also eager to point out their distinctiveness. As opposed to accumulation proper, what "may be called primitive accumulation . . . is the historical basis, instead of the historical result, of specifically capitalist production" (Marx 1867: 775). While sharing the same principle — *separation* — the two concepts point at two different *conditions* of existence. The latter implies the *ex novo production* of the *separation*, while the latter implies the *reproduction* — on a greater scale — of the same *separation*:

It is in fact this divorce between the conditions of labour on the one hand and the producers on the other that forms the concept of capital, as this arises with primitive accumulation . . . subsequently appearing as a constant process in the accumulation and concentration of capital, before it is finally expressed here as the centralization of capitals already existing in few hands, and the decapitalization of many (Marx 1894: 354-5).

The key difference thus resides for Marx not so much in the timing of the occurrence of this separation — although a sequential element is naturally always present — rather in the

conditions and circumstances in which this separation is enforced. In the *Grundrisse* for example, Marx stresses the distinction between the conditions of capital's arising (becoming), and the conditions of capital's existence (being). The former, "disappear as real capital arises", while the latter do not appear as "conditions of its arising, but as results of its presence" (Marx 1858: 460-1). Marx is emphasising here a simple but crucial point: "Once developed historically, capital itself creates the conditions of its existence (not as conditions for its arising, but as results of its being)" (Marx 1858: 459), and therefore it drives to reproduce (at increasing scale) the separation between means of production and producers. However, the *ex novo* production of the separation implies social forces that are posited outside the realm of impersonal "pure" economic laws. The *ex novo* separation of means of production and producers corresponds to the *ex novo* creation of the *opposition* between the two, to the *ex novo* foundation of the specific alien character acquired by labour in capitalism.

This is the element of novelty, of "originality" that Marx seems to indicate when he stresses that while accumulation relies *primarily* on "the silent compulsion of economic relations [which] sets the seal on the domination of the capitalist over the worker," in the case of primitive accumulation the separation is imposed *primarily* through "[d]irect extra-economic force" (Marx 1867: 899-900), such as the state (Marx 1867: 900), particular sections of social classes (Marx 1867: 879), etc. We can say therefore that primitive accumulation for Marx is a social process instigated by some social actor (the state, particular social classes, etc.) aimed at the people who have some form of direct access to the means of production. This social process often takes the form of a strategy that aims to separate them from the means of production.

The above discussion allows us to explicate two broad theoretical cornerstones towards a reformulation of Marx's theory of primitive accumulation. First, separation does not only indicate the rupture *between* modes of production in an epochal period of "transition". This implies that primitive accumulation cannot be confined to a distant past. In Marx's interpretation I am proposing there is nothing indicating that this separation may not occur any time, even within a "mature" capitalist mode of production, when the conditions for an *ex novo* separation are posited. I will discuss this issue in more details in section 5, while assessing the elements of continuity of Marx's theory of primitive accumulation within the capitalist mode of production. Second, insisting on the role of *separation* in the definition of primitive accumulation and stressing that the distinction between accumulation and primitive accumulation is based on the conditions of implementation of this separation opens the way for investigating what are the different possible forms of primitive accumulation. This of course may

³ For a more detailed analysis of the connection between reification and commodity-fetishism in Marx's analysis see De Angelis (1996).

lead to the formulation of a taxonomy of primitive accumulation that cannot be discussed here. In section 4 I instead discuss some of the variants of primitive accumulation proposed by Marx.

4. Different forms of primitive accumulation in Marx.

It is well known that Marx's discussion of the process of land enclosure in England, was a mere *illustration* of primitive accumulation, an illustration specific to England.⁴ Furthermore, even Marx's discussion of primitive accumulation in England takes us by default to distant lands, to the extent these areas are linked and subordinated to the process of accumulation in England.⁵ A typical example is the slave trade. Between 1690 and 1721 new ports were created (as in Liverpool), while old ones gained new life as result of flourishing slave trade (as in Bristol). The number of transported slaves jumped from 27,500 in the seventeenth century to an estimate of between 40,000 and 100,000 in the XVIII Century (Linebaugh 1991: 46). Marx has no difficulty in pointing out that "Liverpool grew fat on the basis of the slave trade" and that indeed "this was its method of primitive accumulation" (Marx 1867: 924). However, this method of primitive accumulation did not entail a classic-Marxist model of transition applied to Africa from feudalism to capitalism. This model, that was common Marxist orthodoxy until not long ago, by emphasising the role played by land enclosures in the "transition" from feudal to a capitalist mode of production in England, has contributed to turn the concept of primitive accumulation into a corner-stone of a monumental building generally referred to as "stage theory".⁶ Instead, the example of the slave trade shows that primitive accumulation may

⁴In a letter to the editorial board of the *Otechestvenniye Zapiski* of November 1877, Marx clarifies how "[t]he chapter on primitive accumulation claims no more than to trace the path by which, in Western Europe, the capitalist economic order emerged from the womb of the feudal economic order. It therefore presents the historical movement which, by divorcing the producers from their means of production, converted the former into wage-labourers (proletarians in the modern sense of the word) and the owners of the latter into capitalists" (Marx 1878: 135).

⁵ The narrow geographical confinement often implicit in the traditional historical approach has of course been at the basis of some criticism. For example in his famous study on African underdevelopment, Walter Rodney (1972: 101) writes: "The ideological gulf is responsible for the fact that most bourgeois scholars write about phenomena such as the industrial revolution in England without once mentioning the European slave trade as a factor of primary accumulation of capital . . . But even Marxists (as prominent as Maurice Dobb and F.J. Hobsbawm) for many years concentrated on examining the evolution of capitalism out of feudalism inside Europe, with only marginal reference to the massive exploitation of Africans, Asians and American Indians."

⁶ According to the "stage theory" interpretation, Marx divides world history into stages, each of which has its own economic and social structure. The transition from an "inferior" to a "superior" stage must follow a logical path, and it is not possible to skip stages of development. This interpretation, which was dominant until not long ago, constitutes the basic framework of classic historic materialism. It is linked to the historical interpretation of primitive accumulation, in that a temporally clear cut primitive accumulation would create the conditions for the transition to the capitalist stage of world history. Unfortunately, Marx wrote against turning the English experience into a model for the universal history of social and economic development. For example, in the French edition of *Capital*, the last edited by Marx himself, Marx clearly limits his analysis of primitive accumulation to *Western* Europe (Smith 1995: 54). In a clear statement against universal stage theory, Marx's famous reply to Vera Zasulich is self-explicatory: "The 'historical inevitability' of a complete separation of . . . the producer from the means of production . . . is therefore *expressly* restricted to *the countries of Western Europe*" (Marx 1881: 124).

occur through the interaction between North and South, an international division of labour, the destruction of African communities, and enslavement. Marx was of course very well aware of all these forms. Therefore, in this case, the “historical process of separating the producers from the means of production” revealed characteristics and dimensions quite different from the stereotypical representation of land enclosure portraying the passage from “feudalism” to “capitalism” in Europe. Here primitive accumulation is consistent with an understanding of the capitalist economy as *a* world economy, in a Braudelian sense (Braudel 1982), in which accumulation in one place may correspond to primitive accumulation in another place, in which the *ex novo* production of the separation can be the condition of the *reproduction* of the same separation in another interlinked place. At this junction, we can fully appreciate the insights provided by the interpretation we labelled the “continuous-inherent” primitive accumulation.

Marx refers to other forms of primitive accumulation. These are the ones obtained through the manipulation of money by the State. Marx regards public debt, international credit system and taxes, as fundamental means to further primitive accumulation. Public debt

becomes one of the most powerful levers of primitive accumulation. As with the stroke of an enchanter’s wand, it endows unproductive money with the power of creation and thus turns it into capital, without forcing it to expose itself to the troubles and risks inseparable from its employment in industry or even in usury (Marx 1867: 919).

Complementary to public debt is the modern fiscal system,

whose pivot is formed by taxes on the most necessary means of subsistence (and therefore by increases in their prices), thus contains within itself the germ of automatic progression. Over-taxation is not an accidental occurrence, but rather a principle. In Holland, therefore, where this system was first inaugurated, the great patriot, De Witt, extolled it in his *Maxims* as the best system for making the wage-labourer submissive, frugal, industrious . . . and overburdened with work (Marx 1867: 921).

All the same, the international credit system that grows along national debt

often conceals one of the sources of primitive accumulation in this or that people. . . . A great deal of capital, which appears today in the United States without any birth-certificate, was yesterday, in England, the capitalised blood of children (Marx 1867: 920).

All these examples point at the fact that primitive accumulation for Marx does not assume only the form of direct land enclosure as in the process of English primitive accumulation, but it also occurs through other means. A brief survey of the current literature on the link between third World debt and widespread poverty reveals that the features of XVIII-XIX Centuries capitalism may well have a

striking resemblance to those of XXI Century capitalism, once of course the different historical contexts are taken into consideration.

5. The Continuous character of Primitive Accumulation.

5.1. Introduction.

In a recent important study Michael Perelman (2000, ch. 2)⁷ supports the idea of the continuous character of primitive accumulation in Marx along three main lines of interpretation⁸ and provide some textual evidence⁹. Also, Perelman points out that Marx wanted to de-emphasise the concept of primitive accumulation for a political and strategic, rather than theoretical, reason. Excessive emphasis on primitive accumulation would have distracted the reader from the “silent compulsion of the market” (Perelman 2000: 31). The argument is that Marx wanted to stress the role of market forces, where market forces have replaced primitive accumulation as a disciplinary device enforcing the separation between labour and means of production. Although this interpretation may explain Marx’s relatively less extended discussion of the category of primitive accumulation, it does not address the question of the extent to which Marx's theoretical framework is compatible with the continuous character of the primitive accumulation.

5.2. Continuity, class conflict and communism.

The interpretation of Marx’s analysis of primitive accumulation presented thus far has revealed two basic interconnected points: first, primitive accumulation is the *ex-novo* production of the separation between producers and means of production and therefore, in certain conditions, it represents a strategy. Second, this social process or strategy can take different forms. The historicity contained in the concept is revealed not so much by the fact that primitive accumulation occurs *before* the capitalist mode of production — although this is *also* the case — but that it is the *basis*, the

⁷ See the Perelman's article on this issue of *The Commoner*.

⁸ These are the following: first, the material in part 8 does not appear to be qualitatively different from what is found in the previous chapter entitled "the general theory of capitalist accumulation". Second, "When Marx's study of primitive accumulation finally reached the subject of Edward Gibbon Wakefield, Marx did not qualify his appreciation of the father of modern colonial theory by limiting its relevance to an earlier England. Instead, he insisted that Wakefield offered significant insights into the England where Marx lived and worked" (Perelman 1997, Ch. 2: 4). Third, "read in this light, Marx's letter to Mikhailovsky is also consistent with the idea that the importance of primitive accumulation was not what it taught about backward societies, but about the most advanced societies. . . . Marx himself, referring to the institutions of Mexico, insisted that '[t]he nature of capital remains the same in its developed as in its underdeveloped forms' (Marx 1867: 400n)" (Perelman 1997, Ch. 2: 4).

⁹ For example, in relation to the discussion of the falling rate of profit, Marx’s reference to “expropriating the final residue of direct producers who still have something left to expropriate” (Marx 1894: 348). This of course presupposes that the process of expropriation, of *ex-novo* separation between producers and means of production, is not completed within a mature capitalist society, one in which the rate of profit is subjected to the tendency to fall.

presupposition, the basic precondition which is necessary *if* accumulation of capital must occur. It must be noted that this last definition is Marx's own and it is more general than the one adopted by the classical "historical interpretation", and therefore it includes it. This is because if primitive accumulation is defined in terms of the preconditions it satisfies for the accumulation of capital, its temporal dimension includes in principle both the period of the establishment of a capitalist mode of production *and* the preservation and expansion of the capitalist mode of production *any time the producers set themselves as an obstacle to the reproduction of their separation to the means of production*, separation understood in terms described before.

Another way to put it would be through Karl Polanyi's concept of "double movement" (Polanyi 1944). On one side there is the historical movement of the market, a movement that has no inherent limit and that therefore threatens society's very existence. On the other there is society's natural propensity to defend itself, and therefore to create institutions for its protection. In Polanyi's terms, the continuous element of Marx's primitive accumulation could be identified in those social processes or sets of strategies aimed at dismantling those institutions that protect society from the market. The crucial element of continuity in the reformulation of Marx's theory of primitive accumulation arises therefore once we acknowledge the *other* movement of society.

We have derived the strategic character of primitive accumulation from its definition: "the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production", while in the definition of accumulation this divorcing occurred at increasing scale. In Marx, this latter divorcing is clearly the result of the driving force of what we may call a main historical subject — albeit a depersonalised one — that is, capital, which Marx repeatedly defines in terms of its endless drive for self-expansion, accumulation¹⁰. This endless drive for expansion is bound to clash against such limits as those posed by geographical areas unaffected by capitalist production or at its margin. Examples of expansion in geographical areas include for example the already cited slave trade mentioned by Marx, and Luxemburg's discussion may at least be seen as highlighting this insight within Marx's text.¹¹ However, Marx often refers to capital also as *reactive* vis-à-vis those social forces that pose a limit to accumulation. Especially, capital is seen as reacting against the effects of various struggles engaged

¹⁰For example, Marx argues that "the circulation of money as capital is an end in itself, for the valorisation of value takes place only within this constantly renewed movement. The movement of capital is therefore limitless" (Marx 1967: 253). For a discussion of Marx's notion of boundlessness of accumulation see De Angelis (1995).

¹¹ There are many other examples referred to by radical scholars. Perelman (1997) cites household economy as a target of primitive accumulation, as well as the expropriation of other commons such as turning traditional holidays into working days. Federici (1992), Fortunati (1981) and Mies (1986) among others, refer to the expropriation of women's bodies, that is of sexual and reproductive powers of women, for the accumulation of labour power that suits capital's valorisation requirements. Federici (1988) refers to the witch-hunt terror in the sixteenth and seventeenth-centuries which opened the way for these state attempts to control demographic rates and the reproduction of labour power.

by what Marx believed was the historical subject of social transformation *par excellence* — the working class.¹²

The clash of these two historical forces reveals the oppositional nature of the “present form of production relations” which “gives signs of its becoming — foreshadowing of the future” (Marx 1858: 461). We have seen that Marx defines the oppositional nature embedded in capitalist relation of production in terms of the separation between producers and means of production. Thus, the definition of primitive accumulation — of the *origin* of this *separation* — is linked to the heart of Marx’s vision of a human society, as it mirrors a vision of its opposite: that the producers have *direct* access to the means of production (it goes without saying that the latter refers to a condition of *collective* production and not merely to an individual market strategy of survival which is alternative to wage labour). For Marx, direct access to the means of production can certainly acquire many forms, some of which can historically coexist also with forms of exploitation (see for some examples Marx (1867: 170-1)). However, they all show different degrees of the thing which is with no doubt so central in Marx’s thinking: producers’ autonomy and self-determination in the organisation and administration of social labour. Thus, primitive accumulation defined in terms of *separation* (which is treated in the last section of volume of *Capital*) is only a mirrored image of Marx’s leap into an hypothetical post-capitalist society (suggested in the first section of the same volume), in which he imagines, “an *association of free men, working with the means of production held in common*, and expending their many different forms of labour-power in full self-awareness as one single social labour force” (Marx 1867: 171. My emphasis).

In a previous section I have indicated that the alienated character of labour results from the reproduction of the separation between producers and means of production within the accumulation process. The alienated character of labour is of course one of the main sources of inherent and continuous class conflict within Marx’s theory of capitalism. Also, its transcendence is for Marx the main horizon along which he can envisage a post-capitalist society. Within Marx’s theoretical and critical framework therefore, the divorcing embedded in the definition of primitive accumulation can be understood not only as origin of capital vis-à-vis pre-capitalist social relations, but also as a reassertion of capital’s priorities vis-à-vis those social forces that run against this *separation*. Thus, pre-capitalist spaces of autonomy (the common land of the English yeomen; the commons of Africa targeted by the slave merchants) are not the only objects of primitive accumulation strategies. Objects of primitive accumulation also become any given balance of power among classes that constitutes a “rigidity” for furthering the capitalist process of accumulation, or that runs in the opposite direction.

¹² Here enters Marx’s broader approach in which the class struggle plays a central role (Cleaver 1979; Caffentzis 1995;

Since for Marx working class struggles are a continuous element of the capitalist relation of production, capital must continuously engage in strategies of primitive accumulation to recreate the “basis” of accumulation itself.

This element of continuity of primitive accumulation is not only consistent with Marx’s empirical analysis describing the process of primitive accumulation, but seems also to be contained in his theoretical framework. This because accumulation is equal to primitive accumulation “to a higher degree”, and “once capital exists, the capitalist mode of production itself evolves in such a way that it maintains and reproduces this *separation* on a constantly increasing scale *until the historical reversal takes place*” (Marx 1971: 271. My emphasis). Thus, the “historical reversal” is set as a *limit* to accumulation, and primitive accumulation is set as a challenge — from capital’s perspective — to that “historical reversal”. To the extent class conflict creates bottlenecks to the accumulation process in the direction of reducing the distance between producers and means of production, any strategy used to recuperate or reverse this movement of association is entitled with the categorisation – consistently with Marx’s theory and definition – of primitive accumulation.

Marx’s text is quite clear on this. As cited earlier – I reproduce here for convenience – accumulation relies on “the silent compulsion of economic relations [which] sets the seal on the domination of the capitalist over the worker.” In this case,

[d]irect extra-economic force is still of course used, but only in exceptional cases. In the ordinary run of things, the worker can be left to the ‘natural laws of production’, i.e. it is possible to rely on his dependence on capital, which springs from the conditions of production themselves, and is guaranteed in perpetuity by them (Marx 1867: 899-900).

Differently

during the historical genesis of capitalist production. The rising bourgeoisie needs the power of the state, and uses it to ‘regulate’ wages, i.e. to force them into the limits suitable for making a profit, to lengthen the working day, and to keep the worker himself at his historical level of dependence. This is an essential aspect of so-called primitive accumulation (Marx 1867: 899-900).

The key difference between “the ordinary run of things” and “primitive accumulation” therefore seems to be the existence of “a working class which by education, tradition and habit looks upon the requirements of that mode of production as self-evident natural laws” (ibid.). Therefore, insofar as the working class accepts capital’s requirement as natural laws, accumulation does not need primitive accumulation. However, working class struggles represent precisely a rupture in that

De Angelis 1995).

acceptance, a non conformity to the laws of supply and demand, a refusal of subordination to the “ordinary run of things”. When this happens, two interrelated phenomena follow in Marx’s opinion.

First the ideological use of political economy to legitimise the “ordinary run of things”, or the “natural laws of capitalist production”:

as soon as the workers learn the secret of why it happens that the more they work, the more alien wealth they produce . . .as soon as, by setting up trade unions, etc., they try to organize planned co-operation between the employed and the unemployed in order to obviate or to weaken the ruinous effects of this natural law of capitalist production on their class, so soon does capital and its sycophant, political economy, cry out at the infringement of the `eternal` and so to speak `sacred` law of supply and demand. (Marx 1867: 793).

To the extent we identify ideology as a form of social *power* (Bobbio 1990), then this ideological use of political economy at this juncture is in itself an extra-economic means to *re-impose* the “ordinary run of things”.

Second, Marx of course emphasises other, more material “extra- economic means”:

Every combination between employed and unemployed disturbs the `pure` action of this law. But on the other hand, as soon as . . . adverse circumstances prevent the creation of an industrial reserve army, and with it the absolute dependence of the working class upon the capitalist class, capital, along with its platitudinous Sancho Panza, rebels against the `sacred` law of supply and demand, and tries to make up for its inadequacies by forcible means (Marx 1867: 794).

It follows therefore that not only is “primitive accumulation, . . . the historical basis, instead of the historical result, of specifically capitalist production” (Marx 1867: 775) but it also acquires a continuous character — depended on the inherent continuity of social conflict — within capitalist production. In the next two sections I provide two short illustrations of these elements of continuity extrapolated from Marx’s text.

5.3. Illustration I: The continuity of primitive accumulation and the enclosures.

The first example does not entail a “mature” capitalist mode of production, but serves as a better way to point out the conceptual relevance of class struggle for the definition of primitive accumulation in Marx. I take this example from an event that took place during the “classic” period of English land enclosure. On Sunday 1 April 1649 a small group of poor men collected on St. George’s Hill just outside London and at the edge of the Windsor Great Forest, hunting ground of the king and the royalty. They started digging the land as a “symbolic assumption of ownership of the common

lands” (Hill 1972: 110). Within ten days, their number grew to four or five thousand. One year later, “the colony had been forcibly dispersed, huts and furniture burnt, the Diggers chased away from the area” (Hill 1972: 113). This episode of English history could be consistently added to Marx’s Chapter 28, entitled “Bloody Legislation against the Expropriated”. Yet, while most of that chapter deals with Tudors’ legislation aimed at criminalizing and repressing popular behaviour induced by the expropriation of land (vagrancy, begging, theft), this episode goes a step further, by making clear that primitive accumulation acquires meaning *vis-à-vis* patterns of resistance and struggle. This episode entails the active and organised activity of a mass of urban and landless poor aimed at the direct re-appropriation of land for its transformation into common land. Paraphrasing Marx, it was an activity aimed at “*associating* the producer with the means of production.” It is clear therefore that the force used by the authorities to disperse the Diggers, can be understood, consistently with Marx’s theory, as an act of “primitive accumulation”, because it reintroduces the separation between producers and means of production. Although Marx did not include this episode in his treatment of primitive accumulation, in Chapter 28 he does refer to a handful of cases in which struggles are counterpoised to state legislation which either represents a “retreat” of capital *vis-à-vis* these struggles¹³ or an attempt to contain them¹⁴.

5.4. *Illustration II: The continuity of primitive accumulation and the “social barrier” against capital.*

Another example involves a “mature” capitalist production and takes us to Marx’s description of the relation between absolute and relative surplus value in the case of the limit to the working day. At the end of Chapter 10 of *Capital* on the working day, Marx points out how working class actions are responsible for erecting a “social barrier” on the extension of the working day.

For ‘protection’ against the serpent of their agonies, the workers have to put their heads together and, as a class, compel the passing of a law, an all-powerful social barrier by which they can be prevented from selling themselves and their families into slavery and death by voluntary contract with capital. In the place of the pompous catalogue of the ‘inalienable rights of man’ there steps the modest Magna Carta of the legally limited working day, which at least makes clear ‘when the time which the worker sells is ended, and when his own begins’ (Marx 1867: 416).

¹³ “The barbarous laws against combinations of workers collapsed in 1825 in the face of the threatening attitude of the proletariat” (Marx 1867: 903).

¹⁴ “During the very first storms of the revolution, the French bourgeoisie dared to take away from the workers the right of association they had just acquired” (Marx 1867: 903).

This “all-powerful social barrier” brought about by workers’ struggles and which defines the extension of the working day, sets a limit to the extraction of absolute surplus value. The definition of a social barrier evokes the idea of a *social limit* beyond which capital cannot go in furthering the opposition of dead to living labour. In this sense, this social barrier is a form of “social common” because it sets a limit to the extension, the scale of the separation between producers and means of production.

It is by “putting their heads together . . . as a class”, and enforcing a limit to the working day that the producers assert their human needs vis-à-vis the alienating system of production¹⁵ and close the gap that separates them from the means of production.

At this point, capital introduces machinery¹⁶, that is “the most powerful weapon for suppressing strikes, those periodic revolts of the working class against the autocracy of capital” (Marx 1867: 562)¹⁷. The introduction machinery *at this junction* represents an act of accumulation, of recreation of the separation at a greater scale beyond the limit posed by the “social barrier”. By rationalising the working day, restructuring the work process and dismissing the work force, the introduction of machinery aims at bypassing that “social barrier” that was erected and therefore recreate the *separation* between forces of production and producers at a greater scale. In so doing it intensifies labour to the extent that “the denser hour of the 10-hour working day contains more labour, i.e. expended labour power, than the more porous hour of the 12-hour working day” (Marx 1867: 534). It goes without saying that any attempt to repeal the law that sets the extension of the working day would be instead an act of *ex novo* production of that separation, an act of primitive accumulation.

¹⁵ This separation, as we have seen, is realised by the degree in which dead labour commands living labour, that is “the means of production utilize the worker, so that work appears only as an instrument which enables a specific *quantum of value*, i.e. a specific mass of objectified labour through the agency of living labour. *Capital* utilizes the *worker*, the *worker* does not utilize *capital*, and only *articles which utilize the worker* and hence possess *independence*, a consciousness and a will of their own in the capitalist, are *capital*” (Marx 1863-1866: 1008).

Because of the separation between means of production and the direct producers, “the motion and the activity of the instrument of labour asserts its independence *vis-à-vis* the worker. The instrument of labour now becomes an industrial form of perpetual motion. It would go on producing for ever, if it did not come up against certain natural limits in the shape of the weak bodies and the strong wills of its human assistants” (Marx 1867: 526).

¹⁶ “As soon as the gradual upsurge of working-class revolt . . . made impossible once and for all to increase the production of surplus-value by prolonging the working day, capital threw itself with all its might, and in full awareness of the situation, into the production of relative surplus-value, by speeding up the development of the machinery system” (Marx 1867: 533-4).

¹⁷ Marx argues that machinery “does not just act as a superior competitor to the worker, always on the point of making him superfluous. It is a power inimical to him, and capital proclaims this fact loudly and deliberately, as well as making use of it . . . It would be possible to write a whole history of the inventions made since 1830 for the sole purpose of providing capital with weapons against working class revolt” (Marx 1867: 562-3).

6. Conclusion.

The interpretative framework here provided stressed the continuity of primitive accumulation and its fundamental persistence in mature capitalist economies. The foundation of this continuity is found once we recognise what Marx calls the “oppositional nature of the capitalist-relation”. The result is, I believe, a picture of Marx’s theory of primitive accumulation which gives us insights into the essential character of capitalist accumulation itself — the divorce between producers and means of production — and about the limits posed on capitalist accumulation by social struggles. Reformulating Marx’s theory of primitive accumulation in this way contributes to rescue Marx’s theory of capitalist mode of production from its political irrelevance at best and its instrumentality for capitalist oppression at worst. Indeed, to consider "primitive accumulation" as an historical phase rather than a recurrent strategy vis-à-vis the continuous character of struggles, has opened the way even for "revolutionaries" to welcome it and promote it as a necessary stage towards "socialism".

The emphasis here put on the basic conceptual similarity between those processes occurred in the period regarded by historians as the dawn of capitalist era and the age regarded by simple common sense as a mature capitalist system, did not mean to downplay the obvious remarkable differences. The modern forms of primitive accumulation occur in contexts quite different from the ones in which the English enclosure movement or the slave trade took place. Yet, to emphasise their common character allows us to interpret the new without forgetting the hard lessons of the old. Socio-economic rights and entitlements are in most cases the result of past battles. State institutions have developed and attempted to accommodate many of these rights and entitlements with the priorities of a capitalist system. The entitlements and rights guaranteed by the post-war welfare state for example, can be understood as the institutionalisation in particular *forms* of social commons. Together with high growth policies, the implementation of full employment policies and the institutionalisation of productivity deals, the welfare state was set to accommodate people's expectations after two world wars, the Soviet revolution, and a growing international union movement. Therefore, the global current neoliberal project, which in various ways targets the social commons created in the post war period set itself as a modern form of enclosure, dubbed by some as “new enclosures”¹⁸.

Thus, the understanding of the continuous character of enclosures points to two crucial *political* questions. First, the fact that there is a common ground between different phenomenal

¹⁸ See for example, Federici (1992) and the Midnight Notes 1990s editorial both published in this issue of *The Commoner*. See also Caffentzis (1995).

forms of neoliberal policies, and that peoples of the North, East and South are facing possibly phenomenally different but substantially similar strategies of separations from the means of existence. Second, it allows us to identify the broad essential question that any discussion on alternatives within the growing global anti-capitalist movement must pose: the issue of the direct access of the means of existence, production and communication, the issue of *commons*.

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