

Primitive Accumulation in Marxism, Historical or Trans-historical Separation from Means of Production?

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The Commoner for September 2001 is devoted to "Enclosures", i.e., the process of separation of laborers from any means of production so that they become free wage-laborers for the purposes of capitalist exploitation. This process is not a natural development, but rather the result of violent confrontations. It is a process not just having happened in the past, but is continuing to this day. That awareness is lacking in many discussions of social development, some even purporting to be Marxist recognizing the importance of class struggle. *The Commoner* is, therefore, to be commended for driving home the continuing importance of the issue.

Nevertheless, the set of articles also includes a basic theoretical mistake, the mistake of presenting 'primitive accumulation' as if the concept is applicable for all times of capitalist development rather than just the process of initial transition from the feudal to the capitalist mode of production. In this commentary, we review the usage of 'primitive accumulation' centering the collection, and compare that usage to Marx's own, clear statements. We suggest that 'accumulation of capital' proper, without need for an adjective 'primitive', includes force and violence in achieving capitalist aims of separation of laborers from their means of production; there is no need to invoke 'primitive' to recognize this fact. The work of Rosa Luxemburg is consistent with our perspective. Lenin is partly responsible for distortion when he focused accumulation of capital on more production ¹, but he followed upon a certain ambiguity

¹"New and important in the highest degree is Marx's analysis of the *accumulation of capital*, i.e. the transformation of a part of surplus value into capital, and its use, not for satisfying the personal needs or whims of the capitalist, but for new production" (Lenin, 1915, pp. 63-64). Parallel to his delimitation of accumulation of capital proper from including forceful separation, Lenin refers to 'primitive accumulation': "From the accumulation of capital under capitalism we should distinguish what is known as primitive accumulation: the forcible divorcement of the worker from the means of production, the driving of the peasants off the land, the stealing of communal land, the system of colonies and national debts, protective tariffs, and the like. 'Primitive accumulation' creates the 'free' proletariat at one pole, and the owner of money, the capitalist, at the other." (p. 64)

Given that accumulation of capital proper is not to include separation, we can surmise that Lenin would agree with *The Commoner's* trans-historical usage of 'primitive accumulation' to refer to any time period.

within Marx himself, a problem which Luxemburg addressed (see Zarembka, 2000). Throughout this paper, 'historical' refers specifically to the original transition from feudalism to capitalism, while 'trans-historical' refers to both this transition and as well as within the capitalist mode of production proper (not to other modes of production, however).

I. The Problem: Primitive Accumulation as Trans-historical

Most of the articles in the special issue are quite clear in what they want the reader to understand. Michael Perelman's lead article is a reprint of much of the introduction and first chapter of his year-2000 book *The Invention of Capitalism: Classical Political Economy and the Secret History of Primitive Accumulation*. The material reprinted in *The Commoner* does not actually address Marx's understanding of 'primitive accumulation', but we can go to the book's second chapter "The Theory of Primitive Accumulation" for Perelman's perspective.

It is well-known that Marx's concept of 'primitive accumulation' includes and highlights force and violence in separating laborers from means of production. The issue being addressed is whether the concept is as applicable to the modern world as it was before the nineteenth century, or is only applicable regarding the transition from feudalism to capitalism. On this point Perelman is at first uncomfortable that Marx, even late in life, "seemed to take an almost Smithian position, diminishing the importance of primitive accumulation by relegating it to a distant past" (p. 27). Yet he then says that the material on 'primitive accumulation' in *Volume 1* "does not appear to be qualitatively different" from Marx's discussion of accumulation proper (pp. 28-29), so suggesting Marx's willingness to include force and violence for the latter. Perelman later goes on to cite a passage from *Volume 1* that "accumulation of capital is ... multiplication of the proletariat" and simply flat out claims that this is about 'primitive accumulation' (p. 36). In fact, the *Volume 1* passage appears in the first section of the chapter "The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation", with Marx saying nothing about 'primitive accumulation' here ². In any case, for Perelman, there is theoretical ambiguity in Marx, and he goes on the claim that the motivation for Marx's failure to highlight the continuing importance of separation from means of production is what it would have tended to undermine another message of the brutality of market forces themselves.

Perelman claims an "important" passage from Marx to show that Marx explicitly considered 'primitive accumulation' to obtain even after the constitution of the capitalist mode of production. That

²Below we will cite a passage nine pages later (i.e., Marx, 1867, p. 585) in which 'primitive accumulation' is specifically described as historical.

is, Perelman quotes Marx's passage in *Volume 3* referring to "expropriating the final residue of direct producers who still have something left to expropriate" and then says that the passage is important because "it indicates that Marx realized the ongoing nature of primitive accumulation [sic]" (p. 31). The antecedent to Marx's remark on being expropriated seems to be "minor capitalists" (in the Progress edition and the German text; the Vintage translation used by Perelman may include peasants, however). Also, the paragraph is about falling profits and accumulation proper (not 'primitive accumulation'). Perelman goes on to provide his own examples of separation from means of production continuing in the present, and labels these as examples of 'primitive accumulation'. This permits him to conclude that "primitive accumulation remains a key concept for understanding capitalism -- and not just the particular phase of capitalism associated with the transition from feudalism, but capitalism proper. Primitive accumulation is a process that continues to this day." (p. 37) In sum, he simply makes 'separation' as synonymous with 'primitive accumulation', and fails to recognize the possibility that accumulation proper could include separation in its own right within capitalism (even when he finds a quote itself on accumulation).

Skipping for the moment the next two articles in *The Commoner*, we turn to the fourth by Massimo De Angelis, "Marx and Primitive Accumulation: The Continuous Character of Capital's 'Enclosures'". It develops an argument that "primitive accumulation is necessarily present in mature capitalist systems and, given the conflicting nature of capitalist relations, assumes a continuous character" (p. 2). He proposes that the "core of Marx's approach is the concept of *separation between producers and means of production*" and 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" (pp. 5 and 6, italics in original). 'Primitive accumulation' is *ex novo* separation, while accumulation proper is supposed to refer to the same separation "on a greater scale" (p. 8). Exactly what "a greater scale" for separation is to mean is rather unclear, although an example De Angelis cites may help. When labor organizes to create a "social barrier" to extending the length of the working day, capital introduces machinery as a counter-element against the working class:

The introduction of machinery *at this juncture* represents an act of accumulation, of re-creation of the separation at a greater scale beyond the limit posed by the "social barrier". By rationalizing 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 re-creates 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" [citing Marx in *Volume I*]. 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. (p. 18, italics in original)

As best as we can understand, forcing **more** work hours (repealing working-day laws) is additional separation ('primitive accumulation'), while **more intense** hours of work (in this case, through the introduction of facilitating machinery) is greater separation ('accumulation' proper). In any case, historical time does not seem involved in the distinction.

Werner Bonefeld's "The Permanence of Primitive Accumulation: Commodity Fetishism and Social Constitution" cites (p. 2, fn. 2) De Angelis' work as background. He asserts explicitly: "primitive accumulation describes not just the period of transition that led to the emergence of capitalism.... [Rather,] primitive accumulation is a constantly reproduced accumulation, be it in terms of the renewed separation of new populations from the means of production and subsistence, or in terms of the reproduction of the wage relation in the 'established' relations of capital. The former seeks to bring new workers under the command of capital and the latter to contain them as an exploitable human resource -- the so-called human factor of production.... Capitalist accumulation itself rests on the continuously reproduced divorce of labor" from means of production. (pp. 1-3)

Throughout the Bonefeld's article no distinction between accumulation proper and 'primitive accumulation' is even attempted -- a deficiency De Angelis at least tries to avoid. If we should accept that accumulation of capital is indeed separation of new laborers from means of production, then, why bother with the concept of 'primitive accumulation'?

Bonefeld goes on to use and interpret Rosa Luxemburg's (1951) *Accumulation of Capital*, but in a manner seeming to undermine his own position. It was possible for her, says Bonefeld, "to accept the view that primitive accumulation marks the period of transition to capitalism and to argue, at least by implication, that [separation of laborers from means of production³] is a feature of the crisis-ridden character of capitalist accumulation" (p. 2). This would be perfectly correct. Except Bonefeld uses 'primitive accumulation' for the bracketed expression, while Luxemburg is absolutely clear that 'primitive accumulation' is historical:

At the time of primitive accumulation, i.e. at the end of the Middle Ages, when the history of

³I have deliberately substituted the bracketed expression for Bonefeld's use of "primitive accumulation", in order to

capitalism in Europe began, and right into the nineteenth century, dispossessing the peasants in England and on the Continent was the most striking weapon in the large-scale transformation of means of production and labor power into capital. Yet capital in power performs the same task even today, and on an even more important scale -- by modern colonial policy.... With that we have passed beyond the stage of primitive accumulation; this process is still going on. (pp. 369-70)

In other words, Luxemburg recognizes exactly that which the whole issue of *The Commoner* draws attention -- dispossession, while continuing to reserve 'primitive accumulation' for the original rise of the capitalist mode of production. She even writes in the spirit of *The Commoner*: "Accumulation, with its spasmodic expansion, can no more wait for, and be content with, a natural internal disintegration of non-capitalist formations and their transition to commodity economy, than it can wait for, and be content with, the natural increase of the working population. Force is the only solution open to capital." (pp. 370-71). In other words, we **can utilize Luxemburg's understanding of 'accumulation of capital' proper as separation, with all the blood, sweat and tears it entails! We don't have to give up 'primitive accumulation' as being historical in order to confront the reality of separation/dispossession.**

De Angelis and Bonefeld are quite correct to emphasize separation from means of production. But never do they cite a place in Marx where Marx himself refers to 'primitive accumulation' other than in the historical process of movement from feudalism to capitalism. And they avoid certain portions of Marx in which he is quite clear of the context for his usage of 'primitive accumulation'. Thus, neither one cites the first paragraph of *Capital, Volume I*, Part VIII, "The So-called Primitive Accumulation" in which Marx notes that accumulation of capital presupposes surplus-value and surplus-value, capitalist production and, therefore, everything "seems to turn in a vicious circle, out of which we can only get by supposing a primitive accumulation (previous accumulation of Adam Smith) preceding capitalistic accumulation; an accumulation not the result of the capitalistic mode of production, but its starting point" (Marx, 1867, p. 667). **'Primitive accumulation', says Marx, "appears as primitive, because it forms the pre-historic stage of capital and of the mode of production corresponding with it"** (p. 668). In order to sustain their argument they would have to confront these well-known passages. But they would also have to deal satisfactorily with many other similar, less well-known passages such as:

start with a correct reading of Luxemburg's thought.

primitive accumulation... is the historic basis, instead of the historic result of specifically capitalist production. How it itself originates, we need not here inquire as yet. It is enough that it forms the starting-point. (1867, p. 585)

It is this same severance of the conditions of production, on the one hand, from the producers, on the other, that forms the conception of capital. It begins with primitive accumulation, appears as a permanent process in the accumulation and concentration of capital, and expresses itself finally as centralization of existing capitals... (1894, p. 246 -- this passage is cited by Bonefeld, p. 7, and also by Perelman, 2000, p. 31, neither recognizing that the passage only says that separation appears in both 'primitive accumulation' and 'accumulation')

Accumulation merely presents as a *continuous process* what in *primitive accumulation* appears as a distinct historical process, as the process of the emergence of capital and as a transition from one mode of production to another (1910, p. 272, italics in original -- this passage is cited by De Angelis, p. 6 and by Bonefeld, p. 10, but both cut out "as a transition from one mode of production to another"!)

It is this separation which constitutes the concept of capital and of *primitive accumulation*, which then appears as a continual process in the accumulation of capital and here finally takes the form of the centralization of already existing capitals... (1910, pp. 311-312, italics in original)

The primitive accumulation of capital... This historical act is the historical genesis of capital, the *historical process of separation* (1910, pp. 314-315, italics in original)

De Angelis and Bonefeld skirt the problem by arguing that the essence of 'accumulation of capital' as well as of 'primitive accumulation' is separation from means of production. On the one hand, they are to be commended, for it is rare to understand 'accumulation of capital' itself as separation. But, on the other hand, their position is reductionist. A stronger theoretical position is to stay with Marx's definition of 'primitive accumulation', and to probe more deeply the concept of 'accumulation of capital' as used by Marx. Elsewhere we have argued that there is an ambiguity here in Marx which needs to be directly understood as such. One can then go on to appreciate Rosa Luxemburg's work in a new and more appreciative light (see Zarembka, 2000).

The two articles in the middle of the issue -- "New Enclosures", by the Midnight Notes

Collective, and "Debt Crisis, Africa and the New Enclosures", by Silvia Federici, are both reprints from a 1990 issue of *Midnight Notes*. They do not really sustain the theoretical arguments of the other three papers, except by their presence in the middle. The article by the Collective starts with a quote from Marx which clearly refers to the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Later it notes that 'original' or 'primitive accumulation' in Marx refers to the transition to capitalism from feudalism. Nowhere is applicability of the concept 'primitive accumulation' to today's world specifically discussed. The Collective does claim that the 1980s had seen the largest enclosures in world history ⁴, a very important insight and illustrating the persistence of enclosures since the late 1400s. But this claim is not the same as saying that 'primitive accumulation', insofar as the concept is correctly understood, obtains in the modern world.

Federici's article does not at all deal directly with 'primitive accumulation', focusing rather on the extent to which Africa has **not** had consummation of the separation from means of production: "In most of Africa, communal land relations still survive, for colonial domination failed to destroy (to a degree unmatched in other parts of the world) people's relation to the land... Yet to this day at least 60 percent of the African population lives by subsistence farming, done mostly by women. Even when urbanized, many Africans expect to draw some support from the village, as the place where one may get food when on strike or unemployed, where one thinks of returning in old age, where, if one has nothing to live on, one may get some unused land to cultivate from a local chief or a plate of soup from neighbors and kin." (p. 2) Again, such a demonstration of incomplete separation is very important.

II. The Solution: Separation included within Accumulation of Capital Proper

This author and all those in the special issue of *The Commoner* share a same concern: it is of utmost importance to recognize the **continuing** role of separation of laborers from their means of production. *The Commoner's* collection -- especially Perelman, De Angelis, and Bonefeld -- centers understanding of that separation in both 'accumulation of capital' proper as well as 'primitive accumulation'. Fine, and it represents an important step forward from some kind of economic reading

⁴"In the biggest diaspora of the century, on every continent millions are being uprooted from their land, their jobs, their homes through wars, famines, plagues, and the IMF ordered devaluations (the four knights of the modern apocalypse) and scattered to the corners of the globe" (p. 2). One example they cite (pp. 2-3): "In China, the transition to a 'free market economy' has led to the displacement of one hundred million from their communally operated lands. Their urban counterparts are facing the loss of guaranteed jobs in factories and offices and the prospect of emigrating from one city to another to look for a wage. The 'iron rice bowl' is to be smashed while a similar scenario is developing in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe."

of 'accumulation of capital'.

But then why did Marx bother at all with 'primitive accumulation'? There seem to be three possible answers: 1) 'primitive accumulation' is separation whenever it occurs, while accumulation of capital proper includes this separation and expands it to **also** include something else rather unclearly specified, 2) 'primitive accumulation' is reserved for the **historical** separation in the rise of capitalism, while accumulation proper centers on separation after the establishment of capitalism, or 3) like "2" 'primitive accumulation' is historical separation only, and, like "1", accumulation proper is separation and also "something else". From Marx's texts and theoretical necessity, the first alternative ought to be eliminated; 'primitive accumulation' should be used to highlight an essential component for understanding specifically the transition from feudalism to capitalism. It mandates our need to understand that transition and not take it for granted, merely because history happened that way. "In the history of primitive accumulation, all revolutions are epoch-making that act as levers for the capitalist class in course of formation" (Marx, 1867, p. 669).

The third alternative is too vague, not only in the collection we have examined but more generally. In fact, we posit that an unwillingness to confront an ambiguity in Marx regarding the meaning of 'accumulation of capital' is at the root of broadening the concept of 'primitive accumulation' to become trans-historical. We should note, in any case, that there are others who recognize the problem at least in part. For example, Frank (1978, particularly Chapter 7) distinguishes "primary accumulation" from the 'primitive', with "primary" referring only to modern capitalist undermining of non-capitalist forms of production. 'Primitive accumulation' thus retains Marx's usage as the "original" separation of labor from means of production in the initial transition to capitalist mode of production, principally in Europe. In spite of this advance in clarity, accumulation of capital proper otherwise retains its ambiguity in Frank's work.

Seeing accumulation of capital as inclusive of enclosures, of separation from means of production, opens new vistas for a Marxist understanding. For, "extra-economic" factors are forefronted and an economic understanding of capitalism becomes impossible.

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Note: The original date of publication for the original language edition is listed after a name, followed by the cited source.

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